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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Donald Price
Conducted by Kelly Crager**

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Transcribed by Emilie Meadors**

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an oral history interview with
2 Colonel Donald Price. Today is October 26, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the
3 campus of Texas Tech University and Colonel Price is joining me by telephone from his
4 home in Sierra Vista, Arizona. Colonel Price, to begin the interview, I'd like to get some
5 biographical information from you, if I may. Can you tell me when and where you were
6 born?

7 Donald Price: I was born July 2, 1937, in Springerville, Arizona. That's in
8 Apache County.

9 KC: Okay. What were your parents' names?

10 DP: My father's name was Ormond Covelle Price and my mother's name was
11 Alice Leona Munroe.

12 KC: What did your parents do there for a living in Apache County?

13 DP: My dad was basically in the construction business and my mother was a
14 housewife.

15 KC: Okay, now did you have any brothers or sisters?

16 DP: I have a younger brother, Kermit George, who is six years younger than me.

17 KC: So that makes you the oldest of the family children. What was life like for
18 you and your family as you were growing up there? What sort of things did you like to
19 do? What sort of things do you remember about your childhood?

20 DP: Well, my father was an avid fisherman so basically I grew up with a fly rod
21 in one hand and a rifle in the other. We did a lot of outdoor activities in the White
22 Mountains of Northeastern Arizona.

23 KC: What about school? How well did you do in school?

1 DP: My dad moved around a lot following the construction business so I went to
2 quite a number of different grade schools and I went to three different high schools. I
3 went to Phoenix Union High School, North Phoenix High School, and finally graduated
4 from Scottsdale High School in 1956.

5 KC: Okay, 1956. Now, during this time growing up as you did and when you did,
6 what sort of influences did you have in your early life? I'm talking about things like what
7 sort of career path influences do you have? Obviously you joined the Marine Corps later
8 on. Was there a military presence in your life that led you to military service?

9 DP: Well, my father had been a Seabee during the Second World War because of
10 his construction background. All of my uncles were in the service army. Of course, in
11 Arizona, there were a lot of men who had come back after the Second World War and
12 you find those veterans in the trades. They also had, to some degree, influence on me.

13 KC: You were growing up during the early parts of the Cold War. Was there
14 anything as you were growing up that you recall specifically between this conflict
15 between the U.S and the Soviet Union?

16 DP: Well, I remember the drills as a child; duck and cover under the seat at
17 school. I remember the McCarthy days when everyone was so afraid of the communists.
18 Probably Joe McCarthy got people to think that communists were behind every door and
19 under every rug. In Arizona we felt quite isolated from the Cold War and we were living
20 in a rural area for the most part. Really didn't have too much influence on me, but it was
21 always in the background, of course.

22 KC: What about things such as *Sputnik*? You would have been in your late teens
23 when news of *Sputnik* arrived. Did that have any effect on you?

24 DP: Well, I enlisted in the Marines in 1956.

25 KC: Okay.

26 DP: And I was an enlisted man, a disbursing clerk at the Marine Corps Air Station
27 El Toro with the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing when *Sputnik* was put into orbit. That had a
28 profound effect on everyone.

29 KC: Okay, so you enlisted in the Marine Corps in '56, so I'll back up here a little
30 bit. When you graduate high school, what did you hope to do with your future? There you

1 are, you're a young man graduating high school. What did you think would be your
2 future?

3 DP: Well, the draft board was breathing down everyone's neck at that point in
4 time. I didn't want to be drafted into the army for two years. The Marine Corps offered a
5 two by four program. You went on active duty for two years and then you were in the
6 reserves for four years. Flagstaff had no Marine Corps reserves so I felt that if I joined the
7 Marine Corps for two years and then got out and came home to Flagstaff, I wouldn't have
8 to go to reserve meetings because there's no reserve there. That's what I did. I decided to
9 get the draft obligation out of the way.

10 KC: Did you know anyone who had been in the Marine Corps prior to this?

11 DP: Yes, I knew a couple of men. One had been a Marine Raider. He didn't talk
12 very much, but I could tell that he had been down and dirty.

13 KC: Right, all right so you've entered the Marine Corps here in '56. Where did
14 you go for basic training?

15 DP: I went through boot camp at San Diego and this was just after the drowning
16 incident at Parris Island, McEwen.

17 KC: Right.

18 DP: And so the recruit training standards had changed somewhat. We were
19 allowed eight hours of sleep a night. That had not occurred before and there was no
20 swearing. The drill instructors did swear, but not as much as they previously did. A
21 couple of recruits got knocked around a little bit, but it wasn't like it was before.

22 KC: Obviously the Marine Corps had a reputation for being pretty tough,
23 obviously in basic training. Now, as you look back on it now, having gone through all of
24 that, what is your evaluation of the changes that were made? Do you think they were
25 beneficial?

26 DP: All the changes were for the better and I had visited the Marine Corps Recruit
27 Depot since then several times over the years and the training is much more rigorous,
28 especially physical training. They were also doing things that we didn't do back then,
29 such as repelling and tower work and sliding down the rope and things like that. Recruits
30 are bigger, they're stronger, and they're smarter. By and large you get a better Marine. I

1 know that some people will argue with me about that saying the old Corps was better, but
2 I disagree. I think the new Corps is much better.

3 KC: Very interesting that you would say that. Well, what was the basic routine
4 there at boot camp? What do you remember from your days?

5 DP: Well, of course there was a lot of drill and the drill that they taught us was a
6 squad drill which we never used in the Fleet Marine Force. So that was a waste of time.
7 The old Landing Party Manual drill was much better and there was a great deal of
8 emphasis on marksmanship. We fired the old M-1 rifle. They took us up to Camp
9 Matthews which was north of San Diego. I believe the University of San Diego now has
10 a campus. UC Davis has a campus there where Camp Matthews was. So the emphasis
11 was on physical training drills, marksmanship, hygiene, and basically taking care of
12 yourself as a private.

13 KC: Now, you mentioned you got in on the two by four program. You weren't
14 necessarily interested in making the Marine Corps your life, it was just a matter of getting
15 the obligation out of the way.

16 DP: That's correct.

17 KC: Nonetheless you have to find an MOS (military occupational specialty), you
18 have to find something that you're good at or that you'd like to do when you're in the
19 Corps. What did you hope to become while you were serving your two years of active
20 duty there?

21 DP: Well, I really didn't know, but I was a disbursing clerk and in the disbursing
22 office were a number of enlisted Marines who had been to college. Some were college
23 graduates. I learned from them that you had to go to college if you wanted to get through
24 a door to any degree of success in life and also some of the young disbursing officers
25 were pretty good role models about college, athletics, and scholarships and so on. I knew
26 that I was going to go to college once I got out of the Marine Corps and finished my two-
27 year enlistment in the summer of 1958, but I didn't know what I was going to do after
28 that.

29 KC: So, you were working in a disbursing office. How did you come across this
30 position? You could have been any number of things in the Marine Corps. Why were you
31 chosen for this?

1 DP: To work in the disbursing office?

2 KC: Yes.

3 DP: Well, I had taken care of books when I worked in the service station in
4 Flagstaff, I needed to help with the payroll. I don't say this in a bragging way, but my
5 GCT was fairly high and they did put some smart kids in the disbursing officer to handle
6 the pay records. Of course, we were dealing with the entire 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing and
7 we had to pay them in cash every two weeks. There were very few checks involved. So it
8 was quite a big responsibility to meet those payrolls every two weeks. And that's why
9 quite a number of clerks were college graduates.

10 KC: Okay, as you were going through your early career there in the Marine
11 Corps, was there anything about life in the Corps that said, "This really speaks to me.
12 This is something that I want to make a career of"? Or were you just trying to get through
13 your two years?

14 DP: Yeah, we had fighter pilots there at El Toro who I found very impressive.
15 They were good role models, but I had been cross-eyed when I was a kid and I had gone
16 through correct surgery, but I knew that I didn't have the eyesight to be a pilot. I didn't
17 see a career in that direction. I did know, again, that I had to go to college after I got out.
18 That was a big thing.

19 KC: So knowing that college is going to be in your future, what sort of path did
20 you try to take in making this happen?

21 DP: Say again, please?

22 KC: I said, knowing that you were going to go to college, that you felt this desire
23 and need to go to college, what sort of career path were you trying to choose as you
24 worked your way into the Marine Corps?

25 DP: Well, I thought that I would end up in the classroom as a teacher because the
26 school that I was going to go to at Flagstaff was basically a state teachers college. I also
27 thought that I might come back in the Marines. I decided to join the Platoon Leaders
28 Class which you go for six weeks of training after your freshman year and then six weeks
29 of training after your junior year and then when you graduate from college you're
30 commissioned as a 2nd lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserves. So I took that on as an
31 option. I decided to go into the Platoon Leaders Class program. The selection officer had

1 been a company commander in the Korean War and his assistant had been a PFC (private
2 first class) on Iwo Jima, no, on Okinawa. Both of these selection officers were very
3 impressive and they encouraged me to stay with the Platoon Leader program.

4 KC: Now, what school were you going to? What college was this?

5 DP: I went to what is today called Northern Arizona University. At that time it
6 was Arizona State Teachers College and there were only about twelve hundred kids in the
7 entire student body.

8 KC: Right. What was your area of coursework there?

9 DP: Well, I started out as an engineering major as did most boys at that time in
10 the wake of *Sputnik* because of all the emphasis on engineering to catch up with the
11 Soviets and get a—well, it was a technological race, education race underway at that time
12 and we were expected to become engineers of some type. I stayed a couple semesters, but
13 I really didn't like it and I really enjoyed my English classes so I switched and I became
14 an English major, which was kind of funny because in my senior year, I took classes in
15 Elizabethan poetry and so on and I was the only guy in the class and the rest were girls. I
16 used to take a lot of ribbing from my friends who were still engineering majors.

17 KC: Now, would that have any effect on your future in the Marine Corps?

18 DP: Yeah, it did and over the years in the Marine Corps I got several good jobs
19 because I was an English major. I was a staff secretary, a speechwriter. I taught English
20 at the Naval Academy for three years. I started a magazine about the Marine Corps at the
21 Naval Academy. There's always need for someone who can write quickly and write well
22 and write succinctly. They are always looking for a young officer who can do that.

23 KC: That's really interesting. I don't hear those kinds of stories very often. When
24 did you graduate from Arizona State Teachers College?

25 DP: I graduated with the Class of '62, but I actually left the campus in '61. I
26 finished my undergraduate work in three years.

27 KC: Okay, well, let me ask you about national politics as you remembered them
28 at the time. Of course, we're looking at the very short-lived era of John Kennedy. What
29 was your opinion about everything that was JFK in the era? Do you recall?

30 DP: Well, to back up a little bit, I really grew up in the stability years of
31 Eisenhower. No one, at least on the campus, no one took politics very seriously. Then as

1 a young officer as a 2nd lieutenant, of course President Kennedy, I can recall the song,
2 “Camelot.” As lieutenants we played that album over and over. He had a great influence
3 on us. He gave the Green Berets and the Special Forces their green beret and he helped
4 build up the military and made everybody feel like they had a mission. Of course, at that
5 time we were preparing to fight the Soviets and I think I spent most of my adult life with
6 the specter of the Soviet Union hanging over me and getting ready to fight them. Of
7 course, it never came to be.

8 KC: The next obvious question then is you graduate in 1962, in the November of
9 1963, of course, Kennedy is killed. What do you remember about that?

10 DP: Well, we were in Taiwan at, I think, we were in Kaohsiung, I believe, and we
11 were aboard ship with the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines. We were afloat and the captain woke
12 us up in the middle of the night and told us that the president had been assassinated.
13 Some guys couldn’t quite believe it. They thought that they were dreaming. They hear
14 this voice in the night that comes out of the speaker and tells you that your president is
15 dead. So everybody got up and went down to the wardroom and we didn’t have CNN or
16 anything like that. We started discussing the ramifications of what might be happening.
17 The ship didn’t up anchor and get under way. We stayed right there in Kaohsiung during
18 that time.

19 KC: Very interesting. You graduate in 1962, I would assume your next step was
20 the Basic School at Quantico?

21 DP: Yeah, the Basic School in Quantico.

22 KC: Tell me about your Basic School.

23 DP: Well, it was and is a good school and it teaches a lieutenant how to be a rifle
24 platoon commander. At that time I decided I wanted to be in the infantry. In that Basic
25 School class was the class of ’62 Naval Academy. I was kind of in awe of these guys,
26 Naval Academy, especially one of the Naval Academy guys that had been a buck
27 sergeant in the Marine Corps in the Korean War and that it had gotten an appointment to
28 the Naval Academy. Here he was as a 2nd lieutenant. He was the old man in the class and
29 everyone looked up to him. He’s still a dear friend of mine. To come from Arizona and
30 be thrown in with all of these lieutenants with the various backgrounds of Ivy League
31 schools and the Naval Academy, I found it very interesting. I guess I had kind of a

1 country twang at that time. I was quickly corrected that President Roosevelt's name is not
2 ROSEvelt and that a Chevrolet is not "Chevy," it's a Chevrolet. A concrete is not
3 "cement," it's concrete and so on. So I picked up the western phrases from the
4 construction trades guys that I had to be disabused of by my Ivy League classmates.

5 KC: That must have felt really good, I would assume.

6 DP: It was funny. I'm still in touch with some of them. I'm looking at a picture
7 right now of some of the 2nd lieutenants. They remained Christmas card friends for over
8 going on fifty years now.

9 KC: Now, you mentioned a moment ago that you decided that you wanted to join
10 the infantry. What led you to the infantry?

11 DP: I think the instructors at the Basic School class, all the emphasis seemed to be
12 on the infantry and that's what Marines are about. That's not to denigrate any other MOS,
13 but I felt—and being a kid who grew up in the outdoors with the rifle in one hand, I knew
14 I would feel comfortable in the infantry. I was used to camping out, I'd been a Boy Scout
15 and putting a bedroll on in a pack and hiking and things like that. I had some latent skills.
16 Also, in orienteering, somehow I've got a compass in my head. I've never gotten lost in
17 the woods. So it was an easy transition in becoming an infantry officer.

18 KC: I've heard some people say that they experienced some difficulties in Basic
19 School with weather, compass, and maps or the physical parts. It sounds like you took to
20 it pretty well by the sounds of it.

21 DP: Yeah, I didn't have any problems. I was interested in going up to
22 Washington, D.C., and chasing the girls. Going down to Mary Washington, the girls'
23 school and chasing the girls there. I didn't really have a high class standing. I did well in
24 all the things I really wanted to do; the gunnery and the mapping and so on, but there
25 were guys that stayed there all weekend and studied. I wasn't about to do that.

26 KC: Interesting topic there. What was the social life like for a young 2nd
27 lieutenant going through Basic School?

28 DP: Well, as I said, we were always welcome down at Fredericksburg at Mary
29 Washington College. They would have dances and the lieutenants would be invited down
30 there. There was a reserve officers club up in Washington, D.C., that the lieutenants were
31 always welcome there. Then, of course, there're several colleges in the D.C. area. Along

1 14th Street there was a number of taverns, places that you can go. There were a lot of girls
2 who were there working in the offices. It was easy to meet a young lady in D.C.

3 KC: All right—

4 DP: Hold on, we've got the garbage truck out front.

5 KC: Oh, no problem. All right, now before the trash truck came by we were
6 talking about your time there at the Basic School. When did you finish with the Basic
7 School?

8 DP: I finished in '62 and then I was kept there at the Training and Testing
9 Regiment out at Camp Upshur to help train Platoon Leader Class, junior. I spent the
10 summer at Camp Upshur. It's an isolated camp on the Northern part of Quantico. Then
11 that fall we were taken into the main side and put through a candidate class there. So
12 there were a number of lieutenants from my peers who were held over at Quantico
13 basically to train officer candidates. That was kind of a feather. They took the top
14 lieutenants out of our Basic Class to train the lieutenants or train the officer candidates.

15 KC: Well, you must have made a good enough impression then that they chose
16 you for this particular position then, I guess.

17 DP: Say again, please?

18 KC: I said, you must have made a good enough impression with them. You must
19 have done well enough to have them choose you.

20 DP: Yeah, we did and I'm still in contact with some of those guys. Some have
21 since passed away. Their leaves are starting to fall. That was interesting having been a
22 candidate and then having to see candidates from the other perspective, from the
23 perspective of being supervisor or a trainer. It was interesting to see them. I found that an
24 interesting experience in human behavior.

25 KC: Explain that to me. You seem to have attached some importance to this, so
26 tell me about that.

27 DP: Well, when you're going through the training, of course, you're being
28 harassed and a lot of pressure is being put on you to see if you react, to see if you can
29 make a decision under pressure. In some respects, you're humiliated, or the attempt to
30 humiliate by using nicknames or degrading where you're from or your college football
31 team or whatever they can do to try to get to you. And some could handle the pressure

1 and for the most part, most guys could handle the pressure and other guys, they just come
2 completely apart. You just couldn't believe that the guy quit. Some big stud football
3 player who gets yelled at by some little skinny buck sergeant and the next day he drops
4 out. When I became a, oh, I don't know, I can't remember what the billet was or what
5 they called us, but we were the lieutenants who were in charge of the drill instructors.
6 They called him "sergeant instructors," they didn't call them drill instructors. Many of
7 them had been drill instructors at Parris Island and San Diego. So they used the same drill
8 instructor techniques on the officer candidates. Since I had been through boot camp and I
9 had also been through the Platoon Leaders Class training, I could sit back and watch the
10 stimulus and response, so to speak, on the part of the candidates. One of the things that I
11 used to use as a criteria was, would I want this lieutenant leading me in combat? Would I
12 want this guy sitting across from me in a mess hall or aboard ship? Or probably more
13 importantly, would I trust this guy in a jet airplane to drop bombs in front of me? If the
14 answer was no, then I didn't want him as a lieutenant.

15 KC: What was the process? How could you weed people out? Or could you weed
16 people out of this process?

17 DP: Well, you had to document it and you had to write up what the candidate did
18 wrong. He was given specific instruction to do such and such and he failed to comply. He
19 overslept or he didn't follow the instructions correctly or he simply quit or he gave up.
20 After you get a number of these, you call them, "Leadership Failures." He was taken
21 before a board of officers and senior officers. That included a Navy chaplain and a
22 doctor. They talked to him about why he was not able to perform, conform, and measure
23 up to the standards. Another thing was the physical aspect of it. They had a confidence
24 course, an obstacle course which was fairly difficult, if not impossible for some guys. I
25 can remember, here again, this one football player. He, for the life of him, could not get
26 over a six-foot wall. He could probably bench press three-hundred pounds. He was all
27 muscle and bulk and not much agility. Another was the six-foot ditch. You had to be able
28 to jump across this ditch with a pack and a rifle on. This doesn't seem like much of a
29 disqualifier, but there were some guys who just can't do it. You don't want a lieutenant
30 leading a platoon of Marines and he can't get across a six-foot ditch. He's got to be able

1 to be out front and across that ditch and encouraging his Marines to keep up with him. So
2 those were some of the criteria.

3 KC: What about the intangible things? You're with these guys, you're watching
4 them perform and maybe they're meeting the letter of the requirements to get through,
5 but did you see anyone who you thought, "Well, there's just something about them.
6 Something I just can't put my finger on." How do you deal with that?

7 DP: There was no solution. The guy didn't want to be a lieutenant. I mean, really
8 want it. You didn't want him. I remember one Marine colonel's son was with me at the
9 junior Platoon Leaders Class and he lasted one week. I asked him why and he said, "My
10 dad wanted me to come to this training. He wants me to be a Marine officer, I don't want
11 to. I don't know how to tell him. I did come to this training to satisfy him. I'm physically
12 here, but I want to go home." Because of this lack of motivation, it would have been a
13 waste of time to train the guy and put him in uniform and put him in front of a platoon
14 because he lacked the desire. As to what the intangible is, I don't know. I got the
15 impression that this kid would have been better off in the priesthood than in Marine
16 officer training.

17 KC: Very interesting.

18 DP: Some of them come because their buddies are doing it. The buddy washes out
19 and the other buddy washes out. The ones that make it are the ones—they'll be there even
20 if the barracks burns down. They're not going to give up; they're not going to quit. That's
21 the guy you want.

22 KC: Now, how long were you in this position?

23 DP: Oh, in oversight of the candidates, about five months.

24 KC: Do you think it gave you a little bit of insight and experience as to what it
25 meant to be a Marine officer looking at what you're trying to choose, what you're trying
26 to see, what you need to see as a Marine officer and what you would like to be as a
27 Marine officer?

28 DP: Yeah, it was a good leadership laboratory, if you will, to watch what was
29 happening. Another indicator was, as an English major, I would take a look at their
30 writing and every day, one of the candidates would be the platoon leader and another
31 candidate would be the squad leader. Well, they would do this for the week. They would

1 be the platoon leader for the week, the platoon sergeant for the week. They had to keep a
2 log about their activities. I would read the log and some of them were absolutely
3 incomprehensible. The handwriting was awful, the grammar, the spelling, and so on. I'm
4 thinking, "This guy will not be able to write an after action report. If any of his Marines
5 do something great, will he be able to write them up for a decoration? Or when he stands
6 officer of the day, the lieutenant, what are the log entries going to look like?" It would
7 turn out that this guy had been an athlete and he had not been pressed to write many
8 things and he was able to slip and slide through English classes and people would do the
9 writing for him. His girlfriend would write his term paper and so on. So, that was another
10 one which made the ability to write important. Not many of the other candidate's
11 supervisors honed in on that, but I did and for years after that, I would always take a close
12 look at who could write and who couldn't. One of the things I found out was that
13 officers—this may sound prejudice, but I am not Catholic, but I have found that officers
14 who were graduates of the Catholic school system, especially those who had been taught
15 by Jesuits, were, for the most part, the best writers you would come across. That included
16 penmanship, too.

17 KC: I think there were a lot of similarities between the Jesuit approach to
18 education and a lot of the things in the Marine Corps in terms of the organization and
19 discipline and things like that. I don't think that would be as surprising to some folks as it
20 would be to others. Where do you go from here? Where's your next position? Where
21 does the Marine Corps need you next?

22 DP: Well, I went to Camp Pendleton, California, and I was in the 7th Marine
23 Regiment. This was during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

24 KC: Okay, tell me about that. That's really interesting.

25 DP: Well, Camp Pendleton was deserted; they were gone. The 1st Marine Division
26 had gone to float off the coast of Cuba. When we were there, we had all the training
27 ranges, we had everything with no problem getting on a machinegun range or a rocket
28 launcher range or going into a training area, into combat town. So we had a good time,
29 but we thought we would be joining the rest of the division in Cuba. We thought the 1st
30 Division was going to invade Cuba. We were on high alert and basically we were sitting
31 on our packs ready to go and not much liberty, a very tense time. Especially when

1 President Kennedy came on television and warned the nation that he would strike the
2 Soviet Union if provoked. Those are not his words, but I think that's what he meant.
3 Then after Christmas things cooled down and the blockade worked and the missiles were
4 pulled out of Cuba and 1st Division came home. As you can imagine, the troops had been
5 aboard ship for months and there was a lot of pent up testosterone and anger and
6 everything else you could think of. Camp Pendleton kind of exploded when the boys
7 came home. Especially the little town of Oceanside, right outside of Camp Pendleton.

8 KC: Well, I'm going to have to ask you to provide some details on all this.

9 DP: Okay.

10 KC: When the 1st Marine Division comes back home, you say a lot of
11 testosterone, the place exploded. Give me some examples, give me some details.

12 DP: Well, there was a lot of fighting in the clubs. Of course, aboard ship the
13 troops don't have alcohol so they get back to the base and the beer is dirt cheap in the
14 enlisted club and guys are—there's some chest-pounding going on and some pissing on
15 each other's legs. The same thing happened in Oceanside, at the bars in Oceanside. There
16 was fighting that was going on there. Then I can remember the troops had left all their
17 belongings, including their automobiles. We had sectioned off their automobiles onto
18 parade grounds and big open areas and put concertina wire around the cars and then we
19 had sentries on the cars twenty-four, seven to keep people from breaking in the vehicles.
20 Despite this, some of the vehicles had disappeared; some gear out of the vehicles had
21 been stolen. This was a big irritant that they accused us--because we were there and we
22 didn't go--of ripping off their cars. This was down at the trooper level. It didn't happen at
23 the officer level. Another thing that happened is that some of the troops came home and
24 they found that their girlfriends had found another guy or the wives had strayed and there
25 was a lot of heartache and, oh, residual hardship as a result of that. Then there was the
26 adjustment period where the troops were coming home and the wives had been getting
27 along just fine running the household, raising the kids, getting the kids to school, getting
28 them fed. And now home comes the gunny and he wants to start being the gunny giving
29 orders and the wife says, "Well, we got along without you for four or five months, we can
30 get along without you now." So there were some marital problems. In retrospect, I can
31 see that we could have done better. We could have done what we did today where they

1 have the pressure and relief and the counseling. They get all the wives together before the
2 troops arrive and try to explain the pressure that the troops have been under, especially
3 the leaders, and how they probably have changed in their personality to some degree.
4 That they will be going through an adjustment period and it might be difficult. Just very
5 much human problems, but because of the situation, they were all cooped up and served
6 up in one big lump when the troops got off the ships in San Diego and came and trucked
7 convoy to Camp Pendleton.

8 KC: Now, were you in charge of your own platoon at this time?

9 DP: Yes, I was the weapons platoon leader.

10 KC: Okay, now you're in charge of your platoon, you're a young 2nd lieutenant,
11 these guys come back from this very brief overall cruise in the Caribbean. Did you face
12 any difficulties personally keeping control of your platoon? Were there any difficulties
13 from outside units with your platoon? What was it like being a new platoon leader?

14 DP: Well, we were getting ready to deploy. We were designated as a trans-
15 placement battalion and we were going to Okinawa. That's what I kept my eye on, as did
16 all the other platoon leaders. We were going to leave Camp Pendleton within a month or
17 two and all this would be left behind. My major focus was on keeping all my troops
18 together and not have anybody go absent without leave. I wanted everybody to go aboard
19 the ship. AWOL was a problem at that time. AWOL is always a problem, but the Marines
20 are more inclined to go AWOL when they're going into a situation that's unfamiliar with
21 them, especially going overseas. It could be very traumatic to an inner-city kid who's
22 never been anywhere, faced with the situation of going to Okinawa which he has no
23 idea—he has some idea where it is, but it's like going to another world. In fact, it is much
24 like another world. So, what I tried to do is keep in the field, keep on training, and get
25 ready to go to Okinawa with emphasis on gunnery training, physical training, and just
26 basic Marine Corps training.

27 KC: So did your unit or your platoon face any difficulties from the Marines you
28 were returning from the ship?

29 DP: Yeah, in the club and if you had not gone to Cuba—they didn't get to Cuba,
30 actually, but if you had not been on that operation, you were looked down as a rookie.

1 You know, veterans have a tendency to do that, but I just ignored it. I didn't care if they'd
2 been to the moon.

3 KC: Right, so you're going to head to Okinawa. That's your next stop. When do
4 you and your platoon leave?

5 DP: We left in the spring of 1963 and we went aboard MSTS (Military Sea
6 Transportation Service) ship. Oh, I can't remember, it's like a Navy-run transport ship.
7 There were civilian families aboard and I can't remember the name of it, but we left out
8 of San Diego and we stopped in Hawaii. They let us all off the ship and that's the first
9 time I had ever been in Hawaii.

10 KC: What was it like?

11 DP: Pardon?

12 KC: What was it like?

13 DP: It reminded me of the movie, *From Here to Eternity*. That was with Burt
14 Lancaster and Robert Montgomery, about the Army life at the barracks there, Schofield
15 Barracks prior to World War II. I could see a lot of that in the island and, of course, the
16 tourists. I wanted to go to Pearl Harbor and see where the *Arizona* had been sunk. We
17 were only there for a couple of days. Enough to discharge passengers and take on new
18 passengers and refuel and refurbish. Then we were on our way to Okinawa. While we
19 were on the high seas, we got into a heck of a storm. We had a man overboard drill every
20 day and at one point we were sleeping in our life jackets. Some of my troops got seasick.
21 I got seasick, too. Everybody was kind of green in the gills and we weathered that. I came
22 away with a great respect for the sea after that storm.

23 KC: So you arrive in Okinawa there in '63. What was Okinawa like? Here you
24 are, again, a brand new 2nd Lieutenant, or relatively new 2nd Lieutenant out of the rural
25 areas of Arizona. You just traveled the Pacific Ocean and stopped in Hawaii and now
26 you're in Okinawa. What were your impressions of Okinawa?

27 DP: Well, the first impression was how small it was. We pulled into Naha Port,
28 and it looked like one of those Japanese prints with the little houses up on the hills. There
29 was a distinct odor about the place. It wasn't a bad odor, but it just smelled different. The
30 dock was teeming with activity. I looked across at what had been some of the landing
31 beaches and the coral involved and I thought, "Wow, this must have been a tough place

1 to fight in.” But they got us off the ships very quickly and there was a convoy and they
2 took us up to the northern ends of the island where our camp was, Camp Schwab, and we
3 went all the way up, just about two-thirds of the way up the island. I got a great
4 appreciation for the terrain riding in the back of the trucks up there. We moved into our
5 barracks at Camp Schwab which is right on Orwan Bay; we were right by the ocean. The
6 beach was spectacular. Very pretty and the sea was just aqua gray and aqua blue. It was
7 like a—I wouldn’t say ferry land, but it was like a holiday resort area.

8 KC: Not a bad life for a Marine, huh?

9 DP: No, and at Camp Schwab there were a lot of activities. You could take up
10 Judo, Karate, some of the finest skin diving in the world there in the waters around
11 Okinawa. One of the first things the lieutenants did was go out and buy a 50-cubic-
12 centimeter Honda motorcycle. I think you could get one brand new for about two
13 hundred fifty, three hundred dollars. So, all of us went out and bought our motorcycles
14 and some of us didn’t know how to ride them very well. I’d owned a motorcycle when I
15 was in high school, a Triumph Tiger, and so I knew how to ride, but some of my buddies
16 didn’t and there were a few broken bones and broken toes and smashed noses. Finally,
17 the regimental commander, Colonel Hurst, Hunter Hurst, who was later a general—who
18 had fought during the battle of Okinawa--said, “One more accident and no more
19 motorcycles, boys.” And that kind of put a damper on it. You could get your motorcycle
20 oil changed, tuned up, everything for a dollar and fifty cents. It was amazing. It was so
21 cheap there on Okinawa. They had this rice beer, which was ten cents a bottle. Maybe
22 I’m exaggerating, but the liquor was dirt-cheap and there was a happy hour every night,
23 but physical training the next morning was kind of tough, but we had a lot of fun.

24 KC: Right, well what were you going to be doing here in an official capacity?

25 DP: What was I what?

26 KC: What were you going to be doing in your official capacity? What was your
27 platoon going to be doing?

28 DP: Well, by then I had become the executive officer of a company and then I got
29 transferred to another company that was having a problem and I took over kind of a
30 problem platoon. And I found that the best way to take care of that is go to the field, go
31 train, go be Marines. So, I spent a lot of time out in the—you really can’t call it a jungle

1 on Okinawa, but precipitous and the vegetation is very thick and there's a snake there
2 called the "Habu" that everybody's scared to death of. It's related to the Russell Viper, it
3 is poisonous. So we spent a lot of time out sleeping with the Habu's and training a rifle
4 platoon squad and tactics scouting the patrolling. I liked to work with a 60-millimeter
5 mortar and it was always a lot of fun. The troops like to shoot the M-60 machineguns. So
6 if you do things that Marines want to do that they expected to do when they enlisted,
7 they're happy. That includes burning up a lot of ammunition. They like to shoot, they like
8 to get on a field and do that.

9 KC: Let me ask you here, Colonel, you were in charge of a platoon, but then
10 you're given a position as XO, Company XO. How did you get that choice? Did someone
11 say, "Look, I like this Price kid, I'd like to move him up to XO." How did you get in that
12 position?

13 DP: I don't know, to be honest. The company commander was from Colorado and
14 he had a rural background like I did. He was basically a cowboy that had been raised on a
15 ranch and played football at Colorado State. He and I got along quite well. I think what
16 happened is, a couple of our lieutenants got selected to go to and so there was some
17 openings and I moved up to become the executive officer. To be honest, I really didn't
18 like it. I'd rather be a platoon leader.

19 KC: I was wondering if that would be the case. How long were you serving in this
20 capacity as XO?

21 DP: I think about ninety days. Of course, I had the responsibility of oversight of
22 company administration. The morning reports, the unit diary, the supply, all those kinds
23 of things. Some guys like and they thrive at it, but I didn't particularly find it to my
24 liking.

25 KC: So ninety days later you're relieved of this position?

26 DP: Yeah, and I became a rifle platoon leader. Well, I had never been a rifle
27 platoon leader up until that time. I had been a weapons platoon leader. I had six M-60
28 machineguns and six rocket launchers. No, correction, eight, eight machineguns and eight
29 rocket launchers. And then became the executive officer. From there I was transferred to
30 another company and took over a rifle platoon. I'd always wanted to be a rifle platoon
31 commander. I finally ended up there.

1 KC: You mentioned that you got command of this platoon because it was
2 somewhat of a troubled platoon. What were the troubles?

3 DP: Well, there were a couple of Marines who had been in a trans-placement
4 battalion before. This was their second tour in the trans-placement battalions. So they
5 knew all the ins and outs of how to get in trouble in town. They thought they had—they
6 did have more experience than the lieutenants, that they thought they knew what was
7 better. A couple were basically malcontents and they had an undue influence on the
8 younger Marines. So, one of the first things I did was we decided to find out who the
9 toughest dude in the platoon was and then we all put on the boxing gloves. Not me,
10 because we were not allowed to box with the enlisted men. We had a boxing round robin
11 to find out who the best fighter in the platoon was. It turned out that the two Marines who
12 caused trouble were—one was basically an alcoholic who got the crap beat out of him
13 and he came down the stature and the other guy was a good kid, but he had fallen under
14 the influence of this other guy and once we tested him out and put him, not on display,
15 but just said, “Okay, you’re the tough guy. We’ll see how tough you are.” After that I
16 didn’t have much problems. Then I got a new platoon sergeant who was a genuine tough
17 guy and he solved some problems.

18 KC: How did he solve some problems, Colonel?

19 DP: Yeah, it’s just you get Marines, you get some guys that are raised on the
20 streets and some are throw-away kids. Their parents didn’t give a damn about them. They
21 grew up rough and ready and that was the way they acted. The Marines seemed like a
22 good outlet for them. Of course, back in those days it was not unprecedented that the
23 judge gave a young man a choice. Either you’re going to my jail or you’re going in the
24 service. We had a number of Marines like that. Some of them were great Marines, but
25 others were problems. You have that even today and such problems are as old as those in
26 Roman Legion.

27 KC: Sure, sure. Of course they are. So, you take over this rifle platoon and you
28 wanted to have one before. What were the differences between running a weapons
29 platoon and running a rifle platoon? Other than, of course, the weapons?

30 DP: Well, the weapons platoon, whenever we went to the field, my platoon was
31 disassembled and the machineguns were attached to various platoons. The rockets were

1 attached to various platoons so I was in the field without any troops because the weapons
2 platoon is basically a reinforcing platoon. You'd attach two machineguns to a squad or
3 two machineguns to another platoon in the company. Whereas, with the rifle platoon
4 you've got your three squads and they're yours. Especially in the field they're yours.
5 Then you get the machineguns attached to the platoon and the rockets and sometimes a
6 60-millimeter mortar would be attached to it. Forward observers with the 81-millimeter
7 mortar platoon would be attached. So that turned into maybe a forty to fifty-man fighting
8 unit, which was very appealing to me. What I did was, started out by saying this platoon
9 is going to win the Marine Corps Squad Competition, infantry squad competition. This is
10 a Marine Corps-wide competition to find out the best rifle squad in the Marine Corps.
11 When you set high goals like that for the troops, they will aspire to it. We did win the 3rd
12 Marine Division squad competition and we went onto the national competition and I
13 think we finished third , I can't remember. The 3rd Marine Division rifle squad
14 competition was a big morale builder and the Marines in the platoon took a great deal of
15 pride in that.

16 KC: I'm sure, I'm sure they responded very positively to that kind of leadership
17 and, of course, providing those kinds of goals that they could achieve like that. So, would
18 you judge morale in your unit to be pretty good by the time, oh, say within six months of
19 being in charge of the platoon?

20 DP: Yeah, and the morale was always—it's hard to beat down to ruin the morale
21 of Marines because inherently they're cheerful guys and they're a little rough around the
22 edges, but for the most part they're good guys. They want to do their duty and they want
23 to know intuitively what is right and what is wrong. So morale, it did get better. I
24 attribute that mostly to my platoon sergeant. You just have to take charge and make sure
25 they knew who was in charge. Even though—what also helped was the fact that they had
26 known that I had been an enlisted man for two years. They didn't know exactly what I
27 did as an enlisted man and I never told them I was a disbursing clerk. They knew that I
28 had an enlisted background which helped.

29 KC: How long are you going to be in charge of this platoon there in Okinawa?

30 DP: I was in charge of that platoon for, oh, I guess, oh, four or five months. Then
31 selected to be in the operations office at the S-3. It was the S-3 Alpha, which is the liaison

1 officer to the operations officer. You also help the operations officer put together plans
2 and draw up training schedules and things like that. They moved me up to the battalion
3 staff.

4 KC: What did you think of this position with the battalion staff? With the S-3?

5 DP: I got a different perspective on the battalion and I was not looking down on
6 it, but I could see, to some degree, what the battalion commander had to do. I saw what
7 his job was. It was a good learning experience. Of course, I got to go to the battalion staff
8 meetings, which I never got to do as a lieutenant. I could hear what was going on in the
9 battalion as to the administration and personnel. The intelligence officer, the logistics
10 officer, motor transport, and the communications officer, the chaplain, the doctor. I got to
11 hear what they had to say at least once a week. The battalion commander I had wasn't big
12 on meetings. He didn't like to have meetings and I learned from him you could get a lot
13 of information across in a very short meeting. Just have a meeting to have a meeting and
14 waste a lot of valuable time where you could be doing something else more productive
15 for the battalion.

16 KC: Well, it sounds like you are gaining quite a perspective going from one
17 platoon to company XO to another platoon, a different type of platoon, and then being
18 kicked up to the S-3's office. It sounds like you're seeing a variety of different
19 perspectives. I would assume this helps you grow as a Marine and helps you grow as a
20 Marine officer.

21 DP: Yes, and about this time, I qualified with the—we all have to qualify with the
22 rifle yearly and with the pistol. I took to the pistol pretty well. I was approached by the 3rd
23 Marine Division coach of the rifle and pistol team to become a shooter on the pistol team,
24 to try out for the pistol team. I was excited about this. I was going to do it. The battalion
25 executive officer called me in and he said, "I'm not going to tell you what to do, but let
26 me tell you this, you will become known as a "dinger". A shooter, not a Marine officer.
27 Your career would probably terminate at major."

28 KC: Is that right?

29 DP: Some people in the Marine Corps look askance at the shooters because
30 they're doing, for a living, what other guys do as a hobby. I know that my remarks right
31 now will irritate some, but that's too bad. Of course, the Marine Corps needs

1 marksmanship; we need snipers. We must always emphasize basic marksmanship
2 training with our Marines. To go off and become a fulltime shooter, the XO said, “You
3 should think this over very carefully because this decision is a major career change and
4 you’re making it as a 1st lieutenant and I caution you.” I said right there in his office, “Sir,
5 I don’t want to be a shooter, and that’s it.” Over the years, what he said was really
6 prophetic. I saw guys who became shooters and I think one made lieutenant colonel and
7 that was about it.

8 KC: Wow, it’s a good thing he was there to provide that kind of direction then,
9 huh? At what point, Colonel, do you believe the Marine Corps maybe something you
10 want to do for your career?

11 DP: I had a reserve commission and Vietnam came along and we couldn’t get out.
12 We were extended on active duty. So I applied for a regular commission and I was picked
13 up for a regular commission. I decided to stay in. By that time, we were being promoted
14 very quickly. I went from 2nd lieutenant to major in seven years. As did all my
15 contemporaries. I wasn’t exceptional, but the Marine Corps went from I think about a
16 hundred and eighty-thousand to over three-hundred thousand. So they needed officers to
17 fill in the table of organization. So we got promoted during that time rapidly. But then I
18 remained a major for, I can’t remember, I think eleven years, before we finally made
19 lieutenant colonel. We were promoted, and in retrospect, I think we were promoted too
20 fast. I would have rather remained a captain longer than to become a major. As a captain
21 you could become a company commander, a rifle company commander.

22 KC: Well, it’s getting a little bit ahead of the story, but I’m glad to know it
23 because it’s going to be instructive as we continue to move through the interview. All
24 right, so you’re approached to become a shooter. You turn that down. So maybe there’s
25 something in the career path there for you, maybe not. Are you satisfied with the way
26 your career is going so far? Your time in the Corps is going so far? Say by ’63 when
27 you’re there in Okinawa?

28 DP: Yeah, I was exactly where I wanted to be. I was in the infantry battalion. We
29 were deployed. We went aboard ship and went on what was called a "float." As I told
30 you earlier, we were in Taiwan when the president was assassinated. We went to the
31 Philippines. We went through jungle warfare training there. We did live fire training

1 down at the Zambales. We went to Japan; we went through cold weather training up in
2 Mount Fuji. Vietnam was heating up at the time and we floated off the coast of Vietnam.
3 We were aboard—most of the battalion was aboard a brand new amphibious assault ship,
4 LPH-4, the *Iwo Jima*. We spent a lot of time aboard the *Iwo Jima*. A brand new clean
5 ship, state of the art with good facilities. Good sleeping facilities, good shower, good
6 mess hall, everything. We went into Hong Kong. That was like another fantasy land for
7 me to go to Hong Kong; that was just incredible. So, it was great. Being a Marine in the
8 early sixties, a Marine lieutenant in the early sixties was—I made friends, I developed
9 professionally, gained somewhat in maturity and had a lot of fun. I know that.

10 KC: You mentioned a moment ago that you went to the Philippines and went
11 through jungle training. What was jungle training like there in the early sixties?

12 DP: Well, it was taught by aborigines; little people they call Negritos that are
13 jungle tribesman and they taught us some basic survival skills. How to split open
14 bamboo, how to make a stove out of bamboo, how to catch things to eat in the jungle:
15 snake, bat, wild boar. How to take care of yourself. How to find fresh water. What plants
16 to avoid, how to set snare traps, and things like that. How to fish. How to catch fish with
17 a spear. How to spear fish. All those things were—there was basically an adjunct course
18 to the SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance, Escape) course that the Navy taught there.
19 Escape, survival, and evasion course. The pilots would go through that course there. It
20 was a good place to train. Of course, there were some fields there that I was impressed
21 with that were training at the same time. Some of the Negritos had fought against the
22 Japanese during the Second World War. So we were being trained by irregular, I guess,
23 militia-type men. Which, again, was pretty fascinating.

24 KC: You also mentioned that you went through cold weather training in Japan.

25 DP: Yeah, we went through cold weather training up at Fuji and Mount Fuji is not
26 an active volcano, but it rumbles a lot. You can be sleeping in a cot in a tent and you can
27 feel the mountain rumble and it makes sounds. You know, it wakes up over a thousand
28 Marines in the middle of the night and all the guys would go, “Ohhh.” One of the things
29 about the cold weather training—and I’d grown up in Northern Arizona and it really
30 snows up in Flagstaff. I had been used to the cold weather and knew how to take care of
31 myself when it was cold. One of those things that was a surprise to me was Marines will

1 consume about one-third more calories in cold weather than they do in normal weather.
2 Something about the body chemistry. I can remember watching my Marines eat. I mean,
3 it was like they were starved to death. Finally, we would hand out cubes of butter to the
4 troops and they would simply eat the cube of butter like it was a cube of ice cream to
5 increase the caloric intake in the cold weather. And it was cold, it was definitely—we
6 were wearing Mickey Mouse boots and parkas and sleeping in mountain sleeping bags,
7 but it was good training. Another thing was, some of our staff NCOs (non-commissioned
8 officer) had been in combat in Korea. You know, of course, had endured the cold. They
9 were a great help in terms of instructing the troops how to endure that cold weather. It
10 was very good training.

11 KC: I also saw from the biography that you provided that you spent a brief time in
12 Vietnam. Was it during this particular tour?

13 DP: I was in the S-3 office and this program came up called "OJT," on the job
14 training, and what it amounted to, it selected lieutenants and captains and staff NCOs
15 who were sent down to Vietnam for thirty days to be observers with the Vietnamese
16 Marines or Special Forces. This was started by the Commanding General Fleet Marine
17 Force Pacific with permission with the Commandant of the Marine Corps to send
18 Marines down to a combat area. It was commonly called the OJT program, On the Job
19 Training Program. So I ended up in the summer of 1963 down in the Mekong Delta with
20 the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion. That was my first time in combat.

21 KC: How were you chosen for this OJT?

22 DP: I don't know, it's just one of those things. I was there in the S-3 office and I
23 asked to go. The major that I worked for said, "Well, we need some type of experience in
24 regard to Vietnam in the operations office. I will recommend that you go." And I did. The
25 idea was to build up a cadre of junior officers and staff NCOs who actually had in-
26 country experience in Vietnam in case the U.S Marines were committed in-country.
27 That's exactly what happened.

28 KC: Right. Tell me about that time there in the delta with the Vietnamese?

29 DP: Well, we flew down from Okinawa in the C-130. We went into Da Nang, we
30 stayed at Da Nang for one night and there was a Marine Corps helicopter squadron there
31 and they had been in country. Their operation was called "Shoofly." Then the next day

1 we were flown down to Saigon, there were three of us, and we went to visit the
2 Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps, Lieutenant Colonel Khang. He looked us
3 over and he sent me to the 4th Vietnamese Marine Battalion, which was located at Vung
4 Tau, Cap Saint Jacque, which is at the mouth of the river. The main shipping channel up
5 to Saigon. That's why they put the Marine battalion out there. I stayed in Vung Tau one
6 night, two nights. Next day we got up and got aboard a convoy and went all the way
7 down to the southern tip of Vietnam, the Mekong Delta, to An Xuyen Province and the
8 battalion downloaded their Ca Mau and there we went on operations chasing the Viet
9 Cong in the rice paddies. We crossed the Mekong River on the way down there on ferry
10 boats. Here again, the smell of the delta is very pungent. Of course, it's water and it's
11 agrarian and there's livestock there, and rice paddies as far as the eye can see. One of the
12 most fertile regions in the world and I've never crossed a bigger river than the Mekong.
13 That was huge. So I was wide-eyed about all of this. Especially about Vietnamese people
14 and the Vietnamese Marines. They put me in a rifle platoon with a Vietnamese Marine
15 2nd lieutenant because he could speak English. His name was Nguyen Van Phan, and he's
16 still a friend of mine today. He lives in Texas.

17 KC: Oh, is that right?

18 DP: One of the first things that struck me early in the morning looking across the
19 rice paddies was it seemed like there was a coat of oil on the top of the water. You know
20 how the color is kind of like the rainbow when you drip some oil on water? Also, it even
21 smelled like oil in some places when you waded through the rice paddy. Later, it turned
22 out that there was a huge oil reserves in that area, in the South China Sea and in the Gulf
23 of Siam. Those reserves are being drilled today. I always thought that there was oil down
24 there. The Viet Cong were very elusive. They were not main force. They had weapons,
25 but for the most part they were old French weapons and quite a number of American
26 weapons. One of the operations we went on, we went in by helicopters on these old
27 Chinooks that looked like a flying banana. We were preceded in the operation that by a
28 Ranger company, a Vietnamese Ranger company would fly around at low levels until
29 somebody had shot at them and then the Rangers would land and try to develop the
30 situation. Well, this is exactly what happens. Rangers were taken under heavy fire from
31 the ground in this one area. They went in and they were quickly over their head. So they

1 called in the Vietnamese Marine battalion right behind the Rangers. We were getting off
2 the helicopters and the Rangers were getting on to leave. That's not casting any aspersion
3 on them. They had done their job, they had unearthed the Viet Cong and so we got off the
4 helicopters and we went into heavy fighting. It was one of the heaviest fights I was in, in
5 the tours in Vietnam. We waded right into what turned out to be one of the first hardcore
6 Viet Cong battalions in the delta.

7 KC: If you can, Colonel, take me through that. You're on the helicopter, then
8 you're off and you're running through the paddies. Take me through that as much as you
9 can step by step.

10 DP: Well, it was, as fighting is, it was very confused as to what was going on.
11 Lieutenant Phan was, again, trying to control his people and keep them all together. He
12 did not want to go down the trails. We had to go across some canals and rivers to really
13 get at the Viet Cong battalion. So that was an eye opener to me to be walking on the
14 bottom and sometimes swimming and holding my pistol above me to keep it from getting
15 wet. Phan did everything right. He set up machineguns, set up a base of fire. The
16 battalion advisor, an American, called in some airstrikes and we didn't—we had
17 helicopter gunships. They were some of the first Hueys in Vietnam and most of the
18 suppression of fire was delivered by door gunners, and they did have a few rockets
19 aboard. It was basically a running gun fight through the rice paddies. Once we broke their
20 position and started them retreating, it turned into a chase-type situation and then
21 Lieutenant Phan, a good tactical officer, with quite a bit of combat experience said to his
22 troops to "be careful because they want you to chase them because they're going to lead
23 you into an ambush." By then, it was late in the afternoon and it started to get dark and
24 the Viet Cong retreated and we set up in a defensive position and dug in. Then we were
25 mortared that night in a couple of Vietnamese Marines killed. So those were the first
26 combat casualties that I ever saw. That was down in Ca Mau. I think it was near—I'd
27 have to look at it on the map, but it was down at the very tip of Vietnam near the An
28 Xuyen Province.

29 KC: I'm looking at a map right now and I can see what you're talking about there.

30 DP: I think the name of the town waiting on the helicopters was Bac Lieu.

1 KC: Now, what are you doing when all this is going on? You're not the main
2 battalion advisor here.

3 DP: No, I'm just an observer.

4 KC: Right, so what are you doing with all of this?

5 DP: I'm just watching. We had some Vietnamese Marine casualties so I picked up
6 a weapon, mostly for self-defense and I'm just observing what's going on and tried to
7 think, "What would U.S Marines do in this situation?" I kept a diary at this time. Which I
8 used to write a pretty extensive after action report when I got back to Okinawa. That was
9 my job, to evaluate our tactics and Marine Corps tactics as to how they would work
10 against the Viet Cong in this situation. I came to the conclusion that it would work well.
11 One of the things is the Vietnamese Marines did not wear flack vests. A few of their
12 officers did, but for the most part, the enlisted men did not wear the flack vests. The M-1
13 Garand was very unwieldy for them. You know, they're little guys may be a hundred and
14 ten, a hundred and fifteen pounds soaking wet, but they're extremely strong. They have
15 the power to weight ratio like ants. They're natural infantrymen, too. They are very good
16 fighters. So I observed and I didn't speak any Vietnamese at that time so I could tell
17 intuitively what was going on, but I didn't know exactly what was going on. Then after
18 that, we mainly conducted ambushes at night in that vicinity. We did scouting and
19 patrolling in the daytime, but after we had given that battalion a bloody nose, we didn't
20 see any more of them.

21 KC: You talked about some of the characteristics of the Vietnamese Marines. Did
22 you have any preconceptions about either the Vietnamese Marines or the VC prior to
23 going into this?

24 DP: No, only what I had read and there wasn't really much information about
25 them. It's not like today; you go on the internet and find out order of battle. What I did,
26 and this was not exceptional, a lot of the lieutenants did this. We read the Bernard Fall's
27 book called, *A Street Without Joy*. It was probably the best book out at that time about
28 Vietnam. A lot of us read that book and, in effect, studied the book about the French
29 experience in Indochina. Of course, there would be snippets in the news in *Time*
30 magazine, especially about what was going on. Of course, Madam Nhu was in the news
31 and calling the Catholic priest "barbeques" because they were committing suicide by self-

1 immolation at that time. She was not Buddhist. She was a very staunch Catholic as well
2 as her husband and so was President Diem. Both her husband and President Diem were
3 later assassinated. Most of the news that we got was more politics, the politics of Saigon
4 as opposed to the actual fighting in the countryside about the tactics and techniques of the
5 Viet Cong and what the ARVN forces were doing to counter them.

6 KC: Now, you spend a month with these Vietnamese Marines. What sort of things
7 do you pick up from them about how to fight the Viet Cong in that part of the world?

8 DP: Well, one of the things was—it was in our tactics book, but we were not
9 allowed to do that and this is called "reconnaissance by fire." They would fire into an
10 area before they went into it to see if they could get the Viet Cong to fire back. And
11 sometimes they were successful. They would cause the Viet Cong to open fire by this
12 reconnaissance by fire. Later in Vietnam, that was strictly forbidden. That didn't prevent
13 me from doing it sometimes. I'd rather get in trouble myself and save my Marines than
14 walk into an ambush. The recon by fire. Another one was their local security. They
15 always put out security. If you went down to the stream to take a bath or shave, there was
16 always an armed escort. No matter where they went, they were always armed. On
17 Okinawa we didn't have to think about that too much. Or we didn't think about it at all.
18 About local security. That was another big point. You'd set up for lunch and stop for
19 lunch and one Marine would climb up in a tree with a Browning automatic rifle and he
20 would sit up in the tree and eat his lunch and survey his rice paddies and keep an eye on
21 everything. Another thing was the importance of communication. To keep your radios up
22 and running. If you didn't have the radios, you couldn't get fire support. They were very
23 keen on that. The radios were Korean War vintage radios. They had these old hand pump
24 and they had the old PRC-10s and backpack radio, but they weren't able to communicate
25 very well. One of those things is they—and I didn't realize this at the time quite what was
26 going on, but they would eat a hearty breakfast and then they would have a rice ball
27 rolled in sugar, brown sugar imbedded with peanuts. They'd wrap it in a coconut leaf and
28 they would have that for lunch. And then they would stop about twelve thirty or so and
29 they would take a siesta until after fourteen hundred. I fell right into that rhythm of
30 sleeping in the afternoon. Then they would continue into the evening. It turned out that
31 the Viet Cong did the same thing. They took a break every afternoon because it was just

1 too damn hot to maneuver. I did the same thing when I was a rifle company commander
2 later on. I would go into a standdown and it used to irritate my battalion commander
3 because I wanted to stop and rest in the heat of the day. He wanted me to continue to
4 pursue. He finally understood it, but it was a different war. It wasn't Korea. There was no
5 MLR, there was no mainline of resistance. It was 360 degrees that came across. Another
6 thing was, though, the amount of water and crossing water obstacles. You had to get
7 across the canal and there was no way across the canal except to inflate the rubber
8 mattresses and carry your gear across and swim and use ropes tied to trees on the far side.
9 Send your strong swimmers across. Get a machinegun across to set up on the far side.
10 Things like this the Vietnamese were very good at. So there was some things I learned
11 and I put them in the after action report. That report was reprinted and widely
12 disseminated, especially for the Marine Corps school systems in the early 1960s. I've lost
13 track of it now. I don't have a copy.

14 KC: That is really interesting. What about the Vietnamese Marine Corps' attitude
15 toward the Americans who were there? Were you able to perceive what they thought
16 about the Americans at that early stage?

17 DP: They liked us very much; they made their Marine Corps patch patterned after
18 our Marine Corps emblem. They sent their lieutenants, selected lieutenants, to the Basic
19 School class at Quantico. They sent some of their staff NCOs to drill instructor school at
20 San Diego. Some of the older officers who had served with the French were a little bit of
21 a problem because some resented having an advisor because they had been in so much
22 combat before, they thought they didn't need an advisor and they didn't. They knew how
23 to take care of their troops in the field. They saw us more as a logistics provider than a
24 combat advisor. I think Tom Draude would agree with that and several other guys who
25 were there with the Vietnamese Marines early in the war. But we got along just great and
26 the common bond, just the saying, "Say a Marine, be Marine." __ (??), Vietnamese
27 Marines, it was a band of brothers; Vietnamese and Americans.

28 KC: Well, I hate to stop at this point, but I think we're going to have to for today.

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1 **Session [2] of [9]**

2 **Date: 27 October 2010**

3 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with
4 Colonel Donald Price. Today is October 27, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the
5 campus of Texas Tech University and Colonel Price is joining me by telephone again
6 from his home in Sierra Vista, Arizona. Okay, Colonel, you were talking about lessons
7 learned and mentioned that there was one more you wanted to discuss today. It's
8 simple, but very important. Describe that for me.

9 Donald Price: The subject is immersion foot. As you know, the infantry makes a
10 living on their feet and in the rice paddies, your feet are soaked continuously and if
11 you've ever had your hands in water for a long period of time, they have a tendency to
12 crinkle up. Same thing happens with your feet and then your feet will actually wear away
13 like a wet cornbread and you'll develop sores and you'll lose your mobility and you're
14 not very effective as an infantryman. What the Vietnamese did, and this was very simple,
15 just when they stopped at night, they would go ahead and dig their positions and they
16 would tie their hammocks up. They slept in hammocks above their fighting positions and
17 then they would take their boots off and let their boots dry and they would put on shower
18 shoes and they would wear shower shoes at night. If they got in contact with the Viet
19 Cong, they always had their boots right exactly where they knew where the boots were
20 located and they could get into their boots very quickly. This was a minor thing, but it
21 was extremely important to keep your feet dried out at night so you wouldn't contract
22 immersion foot.

23 KC: A good question comes up out of this, I think. You talked about having the
24 boots at the ready at night. While you were there in the delta for that month, just feeling
25 things out, was there a prevalence of night attacks by the Viet Cong or did they generally
26 stay away at night? How did that work?

27 DP: I wouldn't call them attacks, they were just probes. They would mortar us
28 mostly and then sometimes fire RPGs into the position or they would just hose down a
29 trench line with automatic weapon and then leave. We would put out trip flares and we
30 had listening posts out at the front of the lines. They weren't very effective. Usually they

1 came off the loser in such an engagement, but there wouldn't be a major night attack like
2 the Chinese in Korea.

3 KC: Okay, another question that comes to mind here, you talk about walking in
4 this constant wetness down there in the delta walking through the paddies and all that.
5 What sort of things did you pick up about the climate and about the geography and
6 humidity and all these things that you would perhaps use later on when you were back in
7 Vietnam?

8 DP: Well, one of the things was, when you're in the delta, there are no major
9 terrain features like mountains to orient yourself. The maps that we had were fairly good
10 and the way I kept track, of course, was with a compass, but I had to find out relative to
11 where I was. I used major rivers and canals as the terrain features to try to orient myself.
12 Another thing that was very helpful, a helicopter pilot would come over and they could
13 pretty much tell you where you were located. This is another thing I learned. I learned
14 how to flash with a signal mirror to flash the chopper pilots and to flash the observation
15 aircraft pilots. Another minor thing, but it saved on smoke grenades. If you wanted to
16 signal an aircraft, you had to find a dry rice paddy to pop a smoke grenade on to orient
17 the pilot on your location. With the handheld signal mirror, you could flash them and the
18 mirror; I just kept it in my shirt pocket. It was absolutely invaluable, this signal mirror.
19 Back to your original question, how do you orient yourself? Basically, it would be the
20 major canals and rivers.

21 KC: Certain distance clicks away from certain canals.

22 DP: Yeah, and of course you could consult with the Vietnamese. Often, there
23 would be a Vietnamese Marine who was a native of that area who could tell you or tell
24 the Vietnamese commander about the terrain. That was one of the unique things. They
25 were fighting on their home turf.

26 KC: Now, I've spoken with other people who were involved in the advisory effort
27 earlier on and they could see that this was going to be an ongoing effort in Vietnam. This
28 wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. The Americans would likely become more and
29 more involved. After your month there in the delta as an observer, did you get the same
30 feeling?

1 DP: Yes, I did. I could see the value of the observer. I saw what the—not the
2 value of the observer, but rather the value of the advisor. Because I watched a couple of
3 Marine captains who were advisors to the battalion commander and I watched what they
4 did and how patient they were and how subtle and very diplomatic in the way they gave
5 advice to the battalion commander. You know, you always can use help in the field. I've
6 only been at one war, but I was never in a crowded battlefield. Any type of help I could
7 get I would certainly welcome it.

8 KP: So I would assume this month there was very, very valuable for you and what
9 you will take away from this on your next two tours in Vietnam.

10 DP: Yeah, it was an invaluable experience and it motivated me to return to
11 Vietnam. As a matter of fact, to return twice based on that one experience.

12 KP: One more question before I can take you out of the delta and get you back
13 into Okinawa, you mentioned some of the food yesterday. How did you do living off of
14 Vietnamese food?

15 DP: I did okay. I had three rules. The first was, don't ask what it is. Second, eat it
16 while it's hot, and third is eat plenty of rice along with the food. I didn't have any
17 problem with the food. Normally, in the morning they don't eat breakfast. They will have
18 coffee. A small cup of like espresso(??) coffee or tea and a piece of bread. Normally a
19 baguette that they learned how to bake from the French. Then at noon, they would have
20 lunch and afterwards they would take a siesta and then they would eat just before dark in
21 the evening. Because once darkness fell, there were no lights or fires allowed while
22 you're in the field. Basically, they ate pork, chicken, eggs, of course rice, and every type
23 of vegetables they could get a hold of to include watercress that they could get out of the
24 rivers. They fished with grenades and like dynamiting fish, just tossed the grenade in the
25 water and the fish will float to the top. So we ate a lot of fish and ate crabs, too. In certain
26 areas of the delta you could catch crabs on the banks of the river and the canal.
27 Occasionally there was some type of mystery meat. I never asked what it was. I know we
28 ate dog, we ate monkey. I'll talk about that later, some of the food we ate in Quang Tri
29 Province which was later on. I didn't have any problem with the food. Another thing is,
30 they have this sauce called "*nuoc mam* ," which is a fermented fish sauce. Some of it can
31 be awful, but some of it can be very good, too. That is a source of liquid protein. I would

1 always try to take some of that sauce with my food for the protein content. I would eat as
2 much as I could because I wanted to keep my weight up and keep my strength up. I
3 always did that to try to not lose body weight because many of the advisors were prone to
4 that, to a massive loss of weight. And some advisors could simply not eat the food. I
5 mean, they just couldn't eat it. Thus they were ineffective as an advisor.

6 KC: I've heard others say that there was a real important cultural significance tied
7 to eating the food with the Vietnamese while you were an advisor there on the ground. I
8 think that's probably what you're talking about there as well.

9 DP: Absolutely and it would be like they came to your unit in the United States
10 and they told you that they couldn't eat C-rations. Of course, we had Vietnamese in
11 school with us at Quantico and we ate everything that we ate. So yeah, it is culturally—
12 you can't go into somebody's home and tell them you don't like their food.

13 KC: What about water? What was your view on water consumption? I would
14 assume that it would be pretty high.

15 DP: Before I go there, there was another thing, if we were in a village, invariably
16 there would be a soup shop or there would be a woman who cooked pho, which is a beef
17 broth noodle soup. They eat it for breakfast and it's very nourishing. It's very good. You
18 can tell by the Vietnamese restaurants here in the States now you always see pho on the
19 menu. As to the water, often times there would be a village well that you could get the
20 water out of. Or, if you were operating you had to drink out of the streams. I always
21 carried Halazone tablets and I would always drop—no, not Halazone, correction: iodine
22 tablets. I'd always drop iodine tablets in my canteens to keep the water as purified as
23 possible. Believe me, there's plenty of water in the delta.

24 KC: Right, right. So your month in the delta winds up. I'm assuming you wind up
25 back in Okinawa, is that correct?

26 DP: Yeah, I went back to 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines up at Camp Schwab and
27 became a rifle platoon leader again. I didn't want to go back to the operations shop so I
28 remained a rifle platoon leader there and then the battalion moved back to Camp
29 Pendleton. Again, we rode MSTS shipping back to Camp Pendleton, pulled into San
30 Diego and then went by truck convoy up to Pendleton. We went to Camp Margarita and
31 we became members of the 5th Marine Regiment at that time. I was still a platoon leader.

1 KC: Okay, now what was it like to leave this area of combat and this overseas
2 deployment and coming back to the United States? Was it something that set well with
3 you, was it part of the game that you were going to have to deal with? Were you chaffing
4 to go back overseas to actual Southeast Asia? What was your plan at that point?

5 DP: Well, I actually was thinking about getting out of the Marine Corps and I
6 took the law school aptitude test when I got back to the States and I passed it. I got
7 accepted into law school in San Diego, but I had to wait until I could get out. At that
8 point, as I said yesterday, you couldn't get out. At that point I decided to stay in. Because
9 I'd been in Vietnam, I was asked to talk about it and to talk to the troops about Vietnam
10 and what it would likely be like if they were deployed there. And so I did a lot of
11 instructing on my experiences in Vietnam. Although it was just one month, it was one
12 month more than anybody else had.

13 KC: So that would have made you somewhat valuable, I would think, to the
14 Marine Corps.

15 DP: I was not alone. There were quite a number of other guys; lieutenants and
16 captains, who participated in that program. What the Marine Corps was doing was
17 building up a cadre of junior officers and staff NCOs who had been there, done that, seen
18 that. In paid in many ways in tactics. More emphasis on ambushes and more emphasis on
19 scouting and patrolling, emphasis on jungle warfare and so on. At that time they called it
20 "counterinsurgency".

21 KC: Based on your knowledge of what you saw there in Vietnam—and granted,
22 you're a young man and you're a junior officer. Did you have any sort of idea how you
23 would think the U.S would approach its efforts in counterinsurgency and making this war
24 their own?

25 DP: Yeah, not really strong feelings, I just thought if we went to Vietnam, we
26 should go into the delta and ride the amphibious ships off the coast of Vietnam and then
27 go in with our LVTs (landing vehicle, tracked) and our amphibious craft. I didn't think
28 we should go into I Corps with the northern part of Vietnam because based on my
29 studies, it looked more like tank country and rolling piedmont terrain that would be better
30 suited for the Army to be in that area. Nevertheless, we went into Da Nang in I Corps and
31 did not go into the delta and we did not end up operating with the brown water navy

1 down in the delta. That fell to the U.S Army and I always thought that was a mistake on
2 our part because it would have been easier for us to justify the existence of the Marine
3 Corps if we had gone into the delta as opposed to I Corps and that terrain up there.

4 KC: That does seem to make a little more sense to have the Navy and the Marines
5 working more closely together in that kind of terrain like you said.

6 DP: That's right, and that has been a traditional mission. We had been aboard
7 amphib-ships forever and we knew the Navy and the Navy knew us. So it was an ideal fit
8 and we should have been employed into the delta.

9 KC: Very interesting. How much time were you going to spend stateside there in
10 California?

11 DP: Well, we got to the 5th Marines and I was there for a couple of months. I was
12 selected to be the aide de to brigadier general down in San Diego at the Landing Force
13 Training Command on Coronado Island.

14 KC: How did you get this gig?

15 DP: I was recommended and I went down and interviewed with the general and as
16 did several other lieutenants and for some reason, he picked me. I really didn't enjoy it. It
17 was more like being a social secretary and there were, oh, I just didn't like it. The general
18 was very kind, a kind decent man. He had been a battalion commander on Iwo Jima. He
19 basically just said, "You're unhappy aren't you?" "Yes sir, I am" He said, "Okay, I want
20 my people to be happy." So he let me go and got another lieutenant in there. I became an
21 instructor at the Landing Force Training Command. Since I was the only person there,
22 our only officer there who had been in Vietnam, I was put in charge of a self-protection
23 course for Navy personnel that were headed to Vietnam. The mission was to teach them
24 how to survive in combat. Teach them about booby traps and ambushes and how to use
25 small arms and just very basic information. The course was only one week long. A lot of
26 these guys who went through the course ended up as advisors to the junk force and they
27 also ended up as advisors to the Vietnamese Navy. They ended up riding on the
28 Vietnamese Navy flotillas down in the delta. I ran into several of them. One of the guys
29 that went through was—I can't remember his name, but they named a BOQ (bachelor
30 officer quarters) after him and his name was Meyerkord , Dale Meyerkord and he was
31 killed down in the delta and the they named a BOQ after him in Saigon. So I was an

1 instructor there for, oh, from about August of '64 to December 1965. I had over eight
2 hundred officers and men pass through that course, all Navy. I got one of the first—I was
3 one of the first Marines to get a commendation for achievement, which was a little
4 ribbon. It was green and orange. I'd never seen it before, but it was only for junior
5 officers and enlisted men. When I got it, all I got was a ribbon. The medal had never
6 really been struck by then. You couldn't go into the PX (post exchange) and buy the
7 ribbon. They didn't even have it in stock. This was in 1960—I guess I got it in 1965. But
8 I volunteered to go back to Vietnam and at the Headquarters Marine Corps, the detail
9 officer, oh, I can't remember his name. He was later killed with General Hocmuth on a
10 helicopter. Crabtree, Captain Crabtree, he looked at my record and he said, "Do you want
11 to go to parachute school?" I said, "Hell yeah." What he was aiming at was to get me
12 through parachute school and then I could go to the Special Forces School at Fort Bragg.
13 So I went through the parachute school in December of '65 at Fort Bragg. Then I was
14 ordered—no correction, at Fort Benning. The 1st Air Calvary had just pulled out of Fort
15 Benning on their way to Vietnam. After that, after Christmas in '66 I went to Fort Bragg
16 to the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and went through the psychological
17 operations officers course, which was twelve weeks long. One of the highlights was that
18 we parachuted into the Uwharrie National Forest with a Special Forces A Team. That
19 was a psychological operations advisor, or operator, on that U.S Army Special Warfare
20 Team. Which was a lot of fun. Then I was held at Fort Bragg for another month and I
21 went through the MATA course, Military Advisor Training Assistance course. Which
22 was basically an indoctrination about Vietnam. We had a crash course in the Vietnamese
23 language, which later turned out to be very valuable to me. So, I spent, with jump school,
24 psychological operations officers course, and the MATA course, I spent almost five
25 months in the army school system prior to returning to Vietnam.

26 KC: Well, let's stop here and back up just a little bit. I'd like to hear a little bit
27 more about your experiences in each of these places. What you're going through is
28 relatively early on in the game and you're a Marine going through the army schools, like
29 you said. Take me through jump school there at Fort Benning first and tell me what that
30 was like. What did you do?

1 DP: Well, when I was stationed at Coronado, that's where the SEAL Team 1 was
2 located. I got to know some of the SEALs there and I would work out with them. They
3 sent their people through jump school, too. They had a pre-jump school at Coronado.
4 They taught you how to do the "parachute landing fall," which is one of the most
5 important aspects of it. They taught you about all the equipment and the parachute and,
6 oh, the procedure inside the aircraft and so on. So I went through this mini jump school
7 taught by the SEALs before I went to Fort Benning. I also got a whole other copy of the
8 army field manual on how to train a parachutist. I studied that and it turns out the manual
9 was written basically on the curriculum taught at the parachute school. I knew how
10 many jumpers would fit inside a C-130, knew all the commands, and I just knew
11 everything that was going on as the classes were very familiar to me because, for the
12 most part, they were just straight out of the Army field manual and technical training of a
13 military parachutist. At the same time, being a Marine they want to give you a hard time
14 and that's fine. We had grommets on our boots so that we could unleash our boots very
15 quickly. The problem with the grommets was that they could get hung up in the risers, in
16 the lines to the parachute. So what they made us do was duct tape our boots around the
17 ankle to cover up the grommets so they wouldn't get entwined in the risers. Well, when
18 you came out of the airplane, you're the only guy with the silver bands around your
19 ankles so they knew who you were. They knew as soon as you came out of the airplane
20 that that was a Marine up there. They're on the ground with these megaphones and
21 they're harassing you. It was all in good fun. It bothered some of the Marines that were
22 going through, but it didn't bother me. They did single us out, inter-service rivalry. I
23 ended up with the Iron Mike Trophy. I finished number one in the parachuting school.
24 That was a feather. I came back to Coronado and I showed it to my general and he was
25 very happy. So it all worked out.

26 KC: I've heard others say that by the time they'd reached jump school there at
27 Fort Benning, the Marine Corps training in general, was more rigorous and they were in
28 pretty good shape by the time they got there. So it wasn't that big of an adjustment, at
29 least physically anyway. It sounds like you got ahead of the academics of the jump school
30 as well.

1 DP: Yeah, sometimes the instructors would make mistakes in their instruction and
2 I would quietly tell them and get them aside and tell them, “No, the number of
3 paratroopers you can get into C-130 is X number, not such and such number as you said.”
4 As it turned out, the jump class that I went through; the troops, the enlisted men, the
5 soldiers; a lot of them were killed in Vietnam during the Tet Offensive of 1968. Terrible
6 attrition within that particular class.

7 KC: Any idea why that would have been?

8 DP: Well, they ended up in the 101st or the 82nd or the, oh, 173rd Airborne
9 Brigade. They were in some very heavy fighting, especially up in the Highlands. This
10 outfit, well they weren't the ones that went in with the 1st Cav, but they were behind
11 them.

12 KC: All right, you finished your time there at Fort Benning and you move onto
13 the Special Forces, JFK Special Forces School there at Fort Bragg. Tell me what that
14 consisted of at that time. Did you know what to expect? What did you see when you got
15 there?

16 DP: Well, they were, as we discussed earlier, President Kennedy had given them
17 their green beret and they were elite and very motivated and very high-spirited and very
18 confident that they could do the job. They recruited from—I wouldn't say unusual, but
19 guys with unique backgrounds. One that I ran into at Fort Bragg had been in the French
20 Foreign Legion. Now he was a captain in the army and he had been recruited into Special
21 Forces because of his unique background and his language skills. I think he was a
22 Corsican, I think, and then he could speak French. The whole school was very positive
23 that they could make a difference, not only in Vietnam, but just about any place they
24 were sent to. The school was well funded, had a lot of money, brand new classrooms. It
25 was a state of the art school facility for that time. They had brought in some very good
26 senior officers to run it.

27 KC: What was the curriculum there like? What sort of things are they teaching
28 you about Vietnam?

29 DP: Well, psychological operations. We did a lot of studying of examples of
30 psychological operations that worked. Such as during the Korean War, we offered a
31 million dollars in gold to the first North Korean Pilot who would defect and bring a MIG

1 into South Korea. That ploy worked very effectively, essentially it grounded the North
2 Korean Air Force for several weeks. It really put them into a quandary as to who they
3 were going to let fly and who they would not let fly. We also had—we did a lot of—there
4 was a mini psychology course, too. We talked about human motivation, stimulus
5 response. We got quite a number of lectures by psychiatrists. It was a well thought out
6 curriculum. We studied, oh, propaganda leaflets and broadcasts and newsreels and
7 newspapers and communist treatises and various how to build a printing press using a
8 coffee can and all that. I can't remember that purple paper that they used to have back in
9 the fifties and sixties. Mimeograph machines.

10 KC: Mimeograph.

11 DP: It was very instructive and they had, of course, they had psychological
12 operations battalions. They have guys who make a career out of that. So they were very
13 dedicated and serious about psychological operations.

14 KC: Did you take to it well? Did you enjoy it?

15 DP: Yeah, I liked it. It was interesting. Here again, I had a double major in
16 college. I had a minor in psychology, but I had enough hours that I could have had a
17 major in psychology. In that respect it was interesting for me. To add it to my knowledge
18 about psychology I took to the course. I took the course and in the end I finished number
19 one in the class.

20 KC: So I'd say you took to it pretty well then?

21 DP: Yeah.

22 KC: Now, when do you finish your time there at Fort Bragg?

23 DP: Oh, I think we got out of there in May, I think, May of '65.

24 KC: May of '65? Okay.

25 DP: So I'd been in the army school system since, well, jump school in December
26 and all that spring I'd been at Fort Bragg.

27 KC: All right, now '64 and '65 are obviously crucial years for involvement there in
28 Vietnam. You would have been, I guess, back in the states or would you have not been
29 back in the states during the Tonkin Gulf Incident there in August of '64?

30 DP: Yeah, as a matter of fact, I was an instructor at Coronado when the Tonkin
31 Gulf Incident took place.

1 KC: What were your thoughts on that at the time?

2 DP: Well, of course, my students were navy and they talked a lot about that. Some
3 had been aboard the *Turner Joy* and they were surprised that the *Turner Joy* could go that
4 fast because it was an old destroyer. I believed it completely that the North Vietnamese
5 had PT boats and tried to take on the *Turner Joy* and the *Mattox* and so did the navy
6 officers and the sailors that were in my course. They believed it completely. These North
7 Vietnamese had PT boats and had no right to attack a U.S ship on the high seas.

8 KC: did you think this would lead to further U.S involvement?

9 DP: No, I didn't. I thought it was just an incident. I didn't think it would turn out
10 to be the cause or one of the primary causes of the war to be used as leverage, which the
11 president used to get us further into Vietnam. You know, there were no casualties, for
12 example. Maybe there was some North Vietnamese casualties, I don't know. Maybe it
13 blew some of those boats out of the water, but at that time, I thought that the situation at
14 Quemoy and Matsu was more dangerous than the Tonkin Gulf Incident. Or the North
15 Koreans would kick off and try to come south in Korea. I didn't mention this, but when I
16 was in the 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines, we went on a reinforcement exercise from Okinawa
17 to South Korea. We did a reinforcement. We landed there and set up, oh, in the defensive
18 position west of—I can't remember the name of it. It'll come to me, but it was an annual
19 reinforcement exercise. We did that exercise for years, it was called not Reforger, but
20 Team Spirit, was the name of it.

21 KC: Now, when the Tonkin Gulf incident takes place other than some initial—I
22 don't want to call it saber rattling early announcements. The Johnson Administration
23 really kind of downplayed that. Largely for political purposes for the election there in
24 1964. Johnson wins election in his own right in '64. What were your thoughts on Lyndon
25 Johnson as a commander in chief once he wins election in his own right?

26 DP: Well, as an Arizonan raised in kind of the Western tradition, I had a feeling
27 that Johnson would be more aggressive than President Kennedy. He would not be
28 reluctant to throw his weight around and use some weapons. I had some misgivings about
29 him, like many people did. I don't want to say that I was apolitical, but I just kind of
30 ignored that. I didn't pay much attention to what was going on in Washington D.C.

1 KC: Right, I didn't even put it together, but I guess Goldwater being from
2 Arizona and being a republican, would he have been your first choice in 1964?

3 DP: Yeah, and my dad knew Barry, my dad was a private pilot as was Senator
4 Goldwater and I knew the Goldwater kids. I had gone through one year of high school
5 with Joanne Goldwater in Phoenix and I knew the younger brother. Yeah, I think it was
6 Barry Junior. He was several years younger than I was, but I was very familiar with the
7 Goldwater's, as was everybody in Arizona.

8 KC: That's really interesting. All right, now we get ourselves through the election
9 there in 1964. You're still going through school and you're incredibly busy. Then of
10 course, in March, March of 1965 we see the Marines splashing ashore out near Da Nang.
11 What was your opinion of the Marines going in at that capacity at that time?

12 DP: Well, the battalions that went in, I had a lot of friends in those battalions. The
13 battalion I had been in at Camp Pendleton, before I went down to Coronado; that was
14 one of the battalions that went into Da Nang. I had misgivings about it because I thought
15 we should be going into the Delta. I had been to Da Nang and only spent a couple of days
16 there, but flown in and out and I pretty much knew what the terrain was like around there.
17 It very quickly goes from piedmont terrain up into the mountains, but it seemed like the
18 Marine Corps was so anxious to get into the war that they would take any mission that
19 they could in South Vietnam, but that's a tough question. Basically I'm criticizing my
20 leaders in retrospect, but again, I thought we should be wedded to the navy, and we
21 should stay aboard ship and go into the delta.

22 KC: All right, you're going through all this training and all this education. You
23 know you're going back to Vietnam at this point. Is that correct?

24 DP: Yeah, oh yeah.

25 KC: Okay, when do you receive your orders to go back?

26 DP: I had the orders clear from the time I went to jump school. I was in the
27 pipeline to Vietnam to be an advisor from that time onward. I got back to Vietnam on
28 June 15, 1966 and I was stationed at Nha Be, which is the headquarters of Rung Sat
29 Special Zone. It's a 480 square mile titled mangrove swamp that's also known as the
30 "forest of death."

1 KC: Let me ask you about that. You draw the Rung Sat. Did you know enough
2 about it at this point to have formed an opinion? Obviously, this is a pretty nasty place
3 you're going to.

4 DP: Oh yeah, I didn't know much about it, but some of my friends from the
5 SEAL teams at Coronado had been there. I had talked to them. One was an All American
6 swimmer from Indiana, a guy named Mike Troy. The SEALs had been going over there
7 on six-month deployments. They were getting TDY pay, combat pay, explosive
8 ordinance disposal pay, and guys would come back and buy a new Corvette. So I knew
9 about the Rung Sat, I had heard about it. Hearing about it and seeing it are just two
10 different things.

11 KC: Describe the Rung Sat when you arrived there in the summer of '66.

12 DP: Well, at Nha Be is only about fifteen miles south of Saigon. It's at the mouth
13 of the river that goes down to Vung Tau and the South China Sea. It is the main supply
14 route and goes right through the swamp. The swamp had been the home of pirates for
15 many years. It was essentially an inhabitable place. It even had crocodiles in the water.
16 Lots of snakes, just not a very pleasant place to be, believe me. When I first got to Nha
17 Be, I noticed there were ships that were tied up right in the Long Tau River adjacent to
18 our headquarters at Nha Be. I said, "What are those ships doing?" They said, "Those are
19 ammunition ships." I said, "Why don't they go on up river to unload?" They said, "They
20 won't let them into the vicinity of Saigon because they're afraid of a Port Chicago-type
21 explosion. If the Viet Cong frogmen are able to sink a ship—not sink it, but blow up an
22 ammunition ship, you would have the equivalent of a small nuclear explosion here." I
23 thought, "Holy cow, that thing is sitting right out there and if the Viet Cong are able to
24 ignite it, this whole detachment, this whole headquarters, the Marine Advisory Team is
25 history. We're going to be blown flat right here because we're essentially at ground
26 zero." So that was always on the back of my head when I was at Nha Be that one of the
27 ammunition ships might be blown up. Of course, the ammunition dump at Long Binh was
28 blown up while I was there. We could see the explosions on the skyline from Nha Be. So
29 that was a first impression that this is a very dangerous place.

1 KC: Now, you talked about the Rung Sat being mangrove swamp. It may be
2 difficult to do this, but how deep were the waters there? I know they vary, but give me an
3 idea about how deep the water was and what the terrain was like.

4 DP: Well, of course they were tidal so sometimes the waters would go all the way
5 out of the rivers and there would be the mud bottom of the river. Then at high tide, there
6 would be a clear up to the bank. So when the tide was going out, the current was very
7 swift. I'd say most of the rivers are fifteen to thirty feet deep. The streams are six, eight,
8 ten feet deep; something like that. Then once you get out of the water, then you've got to
9 make your way through the jungle. Some of the areas are just almost impassible to get
10 through. You've got to use machetes. If you use machetes, the Viet Cong can hear you,
11 which is not good. There's lots of creepers and wait-a-minute vines. Extremely thick
12 foliage. It's dominated by nipa palms, but some Vietnamese had lived in there and they
13 cut wood and they turned it into charcoal. So there was some charcoal. We called them
14 factories. They really weren't factories, but they were these big ovens that had been built
15 by the Vietnamese that they used to cook the wood inside to turn it into charcoal. Every
16 place that we went, I always carried a rubber mattress. I always carried rope. A number
17 of times I had to blow up the rubber mattress and use the rope to get across a stream. It
18 was tough terrain and you were wet all the time.

19 KC: To what unit were you attached to as an advisor?

20 DP: I was the psychological warfare officer on the Marine advisory team there.
21 We had a major who was in charge of the team. We had several other members and we
22 had a corpsman. I was also assigned as the infantry advisor to the 999th Vietnamese
23 Regional Forces Rifle Company, which was a little militia-type outfit of about a hundred
24 or so rag tag Vietnamese soldiers. I went out with them on operations. Another thing I
25 did, my dad had been a private pilot in Arizona and he had own a number of airplanes
26 over the years, a Piper Cub, Aeronca Sedan, a Cessna 150, Cessnas 170 and so on. So I
27 had really grown up either sitting behind or beside my dad in an airplane. I knew how to
28 fly an airplane. I didn't have a pilot's license, but I was very familiar with small aircraft.
29 What happened is the Navy decided to defoliate with Agent Orange, the banks of the
30 Long Tau River, from the high water mark inland, 1000 meters. This was to deny
31 camouflage and hiding places to the Viet Cong who would shoot at the ships or they

1 would put mines in the water and detonate the mines remotely from hidden positions on
2 the riverbanks. The Ranch Hands came in, the defoliation aircraft, and they sprayed the
3 riverbanks and the defoliation started to work. They wanted to keep track of the
4 defoliation. Some areas needed to be sprayed again. They went with C-123 Providers
5 converted to spray. So they wanted somebody to go up and keep track of the defoliation
6 program. So I volunteered to do it, to fly in the Bird Dog and then the chopper, whatever
7 I could get into and I would go up and take a look at the defoliation.

8 Well, one of the helicopters got forced down, and I was aboard, from hydraulics
9 failure.. They had to extract us and Saigon headquarters wanted to know, “What was that
10 Marine doing aboard that chopper? Isn’t he the psychological operations officer? What’s
11 he doing out there?” Well, Commander Wandres, our commanding officer said “He’s
12 keeping track of the defoliation.” They said, “Well, if he’s flying, why don’t you make
13 him a crew member? Why don’t you pay him? If he’s going up, pay him some crew
14 member pay.”

15 So, I went up to Bien Hoa—not to Bien Hoa, but Tan Son Nhut Airbase and I
16 took a flight physical and I was designated as a crewman. I started keeping a log of all the
17 flights that I took. I ended up flying one hundred missions and I got 170 hours in the air
18 and earned eight air medals. Headquarters Marine Corps designated me as a Naval Aerial
19 Observer even though I’ve never been through any of the training. But I had adjusted to
20 naval gunfire and artillery fire while I was flying as an observer. So, that was an
21 interesting aside that I ended up with the wings, Naval Aerial Observer's, while I was
22 working as an advisor.

23 KC: That’s really cool, just kind of something that happened along while you
24 were there.

25 DP: Yeah, we were shot down once, again in a helicopter.

26 KC: Tell me about that. Tell me about that mission and what happened all the way
27 through.

28 DP: Well, we had been on a leaflet-dropping mission and we’d literally dropped
29 millions of leaflets over the Rung Sat Special Zone trying to get the Viet Cong to defect.
30 We were successful to a degree. Some of them did defect. I didn’t know if that’s because
31 they picked a leaflet and read it, but we sure put a lot of leaflets into the zone. Coming

1 back low level and flew right across the Viet Cong position, I saw the guy and he stood
2 up out of a hole and fired an AK-47 right into the belly of the aircraft. We lost
3 hydraulic—you can smell hydraulic fluid and I would sit in the rear and I would always
4 sit on a flak jacket. I would wear a helmet and a flak jacket because I would never have to
5 walk anywhere. I would always be as armored as I could sitting on a flak jacket, but the
6 rounds went right around me, didn't hit any of us, but the chopper, he said, "I've got to
7 land immediately." He was able to make a successful landing. Both the pilot and the co-
8 pilot had to get on the controls to control the aircraft because the hydraulics were gone.

9 KC: They hit a line or a pump?

10 DP: So we landed hard and we were in the swamp. As we were going down, I'm
11 calling "mayday" on my radio and the pilot or the co-pilots calling "mayday" on his radio
12 and I'm in contact with the Rung Sat Zone Headquarters and I knew exactly where we
13 were on the bank of the river because I'd been in that area patrolling. Problem was, it was
14 late in the afternoon and we wanted to get the helicopter out of there and we wanted to
15 get out of there. About fifteen hundred meters away was the regional forces outpost. A
16 platoon from the company I advised, the 999th Company, there was a platoon at this
17 outpost right on the bank of the river. So I said, "Okay, I'm going to walk over there and
18 I'm going to get some Vietnamese and I'm going to come back and the Vietnamese will
19 set up a perimeter around the helicopter. If I can talk to them and I can get them here, get
20 them here to stay here tonight to protect the helicopter if you guys can get extracted. But,
21 tell your buddies with all these gunships that are hanging around not to shoot at the
22 Vietnamese or at me as I walk across the paddy or walk through the jungle trying to get
23 to this Special Forces Outpost, not Special Forces, but Regional Forces." So I went over
24 there and it took be quite a bit of time. I had to cross several streams and I was very
25 uneasy because there were Viet Cong in the area, but I made it to the outpost. It turned
26 out that I knew the lieutenant. He had seen the chopper go down and he immediately
27 gave me a squad of Vietnamese Rough Puffs and I led them back to the helicopter. In the
28 meantime, just as I imagined, some gunship pilot saw us and he's vectoring and he's
29 starting to roll in hot on us and I'm screaming on the radio, "Check fire, and Check fire."
30 We got that sorted out. He didn't open fire on us, but the Vietnamese wanted to go back
31 to their outposts, they didn't want to go any further with me. I talked them into going.

1 By that time, they had gotten that big sky crane chopper had come in and winched up the
2 Huey and were able to get the downed aircraft out of there before dark. I walked on back
3 with the Vietnamese to the outpost and stayed there that night with them. You never can
4 tell when you're going to go down and it happens very quickly. Both the pilot and co-
5 pilot were really on top of the game. They did a great job in landing the chopper with no
6 hydraulics.

7 KC: Now, the pilot and co-pilot know what they're doing. They've got a job to
8 do. They're focused on landing the bird safely. You don't have a job to do. What's going
9 through our mind as this bird starts to go down?

10 DP: Well, having logged a lot of hours in the bird, I was concentrating on them
11 (pilots). I was watching them because basically our lives were in their hands and
12 depended on their airmanship to get on the ground. I was also concerned that we might
13 land right in the middle of a Viet Cong unit. That was a consideration. The important
14 thing was everybody was okay on the ground. We only had one crewman on board and
15 there were two M-60 machine guns mounted on the doors. So I dismounted one of the M-
16 60 machine guns. I had a .45 with me, but I sure felt better with that M-60 machine gun.
17 We didn't have to use it, but it was there if available. Incidentally the pilots were both
18 officers, army warrant officers.

19 KC: So they're probably young guys then.

20 DP: Oh, very young guys, yeah.

21 KC: Well, one last topic I'd like to broach with you today, we'll have to cut it off
22 a little early today, is you said that you were assigned with the 999th Vietnamese
23 Regional Forces. There are a lot of opinions on the RFPF, the Ruff Puffs and very few of
24 the opinions are terribly high, let's face it. What's your opinion of the Regional Forces
25 that you dealt with there in this tour?

26 DP: I understand that they don't have a very good opinion and in some ways
27 that's deserved, but from my perspective, if they were used correctly, they were good. By
28 that I mean, they were only supposed to guard their home village and their home rice
29 paddies. But if you took them and tried to take them in some other place in the province
30 to fight the VC in another neighborhood, they didn't want to. They wanted to stay home
31 and protect their families. So they would fight like crazy for their own home and hearth

1 and their own rice paddy and their own water buffalo. They were almost like vigilantes.
2 Plus they had very good intelligence as to what was going on. They knew all the families
3 in the villages who had sons who were out with the Viet Cong. They were volunteers;
4 they would put out listening posts. They knew how to take care of themselves. The
5 backbone of this company was a couple of older men who had fought with the French.
6 These were the 1st sergeant and the platoon leaders of the company. So some of them
7 were very experienced in combat, spoke halting French, but they were the backbone of
8 the company. The 999th Company was later reorganized into a riverine commando
9 company.

10 KC: Is that right?

11 DP: They were so good and a friend of mine, Captain Cliff Dunning was there
12 when they were reorganized into a strike unit. They could get helicopters. It was difficult
13 for me to get helicopters for a Rough Puff company. But when they were reorganized
14 they changed the name. It was easy to get helicopter support for a riverine commando
15 assault company. But it was still PFs; it was still Company 999.

16 KC: Yeah, that would be a fascinating study right there, I think, on just the
17 evolution of this particular company of Regional Forces. So, what I'm hearing you say is
18 motivation was not a problem for these Regional Forces if proper motivation was there to
19 protect themselves, to protect their homes, to protect their families, their friends, their
20 property.

21 DP: That's right.

22 KC: What if those things weren't being threatened?

23 DP: Well, I can talk about that when we get to 1972 when they took the Regional
24 Forces and Popular Forces and put them up on the DMZ. They were terrible. The Popular
25 Forces were supposed to be used in the hamlet and in the village. The Regional Forces
26 were supposed to be used in the district only. The provinces are divided into districts so
27 the province would be like a state and the district would be like a county. The hamlet
28 village would be like a township. So, if you kept them in the township with their kinfolk,
29 they were okay. If you kept them in the county, the Regional Forces in the county with
30 their own people, they were okay. Once the province chief started to try to organize them

1 into a battalion and use them as a reaction force to move them clear across the province
2 when the Viet Cong are overrunning another village, then that didn't work.

3 KC: That motivation simply wasn't there.

4 DP: No, and also, while we're gone on this operation, what's going on at home?
5 What's it to prevent the Viet Cong from coming into our village while we're on operation
6 at another village?

7 KC: Right, and plus they have other things to do. They have their farming to do;
8 they have their other—

9 DP: Yeah, they had their livestock to take care of, they had their rice to harvest,
10 fishing traps to check, and crab pots to check. These were people who were basically
11 fisherman and farmers who were living off the land and they had things to do.

12 KC: You mentioned the province chief and district chiefs rearranging them. To
13 what level did you have to coordinate your activities with the political structure, the
14 political power in Vietnam? Whether the province is mostly likely district chiefs?

15 DP: Well the Rung Sat Special Zone was a special area and it fell under the
16 Province of Gia Dinh, which is the province that Saigon is in. It had been designated as a
17 special military zone. The senior Vietnamese officer in the zone was the de facto zone
18 chief, if you will. He was a Vietnamese Navy commander. The Vietnamese Navy was
19 very small. The Chief of Naval Operations for the Vietnamese Navy was a captain. So we
20 didn't have any problems, political, chain of command, or otherwise in doing what we
21 wanted to do in the Rung Sat.

22 KC: Okay, I've heard a lot of other people say that it resented the kind of
23 influence that the politicians, the Vietnamese politicians had and how they could operate,
24 but that doesn't sound like that was the case there in the Rung Sat then.

25 DP: The Rung Sat was just—it's kind of like, oh, the Okefenokee Swamp. It's
26 there. If you want to live there, go ahead, but it's just not very habitable terrain area.

27 KC: Why don't we stop there for today, Colonel?
28
29
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1 **Session [3] of [9]**

2 **Date: 2 November 2010**

3
4 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with
5 Colonel Donald Price. Today is November 2, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the
6 campus of Texas Tech University and Colonel Price is joining me by telephone from his
7 home in Sierra Vista, Arizona. Okay Colonel, we were just talking off the record a
8 moment ago about the Rung Sat and your time there with the 999th Regional Forces
9 Company. Pick up the story there at the Rung Sat.

10 Donald Price: During that time, the SEALs were operating in the Rung Sat and I
11 was there when the first SEAL team member was killed. His name was Billy Machen. He
12 was a petty officer from Texas. It was really a bad blow to the SEALs. This was their first
13 casualty and Billy Machen was really well liked. Just a good guy. It really was a wakeup
14 call to all the Americans who were stationed at Nha Be that you could get killed in Rung
15 Sat very easily. He was walking on point and he walked into a Viet Cong ambush and the
16 ambush was triggered and he opened fire and kept the rest of the SEALs out of the killing
17 zone and he was posthumously awarded a Silver Star. He was a radio man, age of twenty-
18 seven, as I said he was from Texas. That was a wakeup call.

19 KC: Does something like that put you on notice? Does it change the way you're
20 thinking about the position that you're in down there?

21 DP: Yeah, because we had a tendency to view the SEALs as indestructible. When
22 this happened, it showed that they were just as vulnerable as anyone else. Although we
23 got intelligence information that the Viet Cong were deathly afraid of the SEALs and that
24 that some of the things that the Viet Cong thought was that SEALs would actually eat
25 human beings, the men with green faces. They could stay out in the swamp for days and
26 didn't need to eat anything. They could drink the swamp water. The Viet Cong described
27 some super human characteristics to the SEALs, which weren't true, of course, but they
28 were really a force to be reckoned with. Not that many of them would go out at one time
29 when they operated as a SEAL team as just basically a squad would go out.

30 KC: What kind of capacity would you be working with the SEALs on the
31 occasion? Or were you working with the SEALs at all?

1 DP: Well, one of those things that Regional Forces Company 999 would do is the
2 SEALs would go out maybe three days early before the Regional Forces company would
3 go out. They would establish an ambush position. Usually on a stream bank and
4 sometimes where two streams came together where they could have fields of fire and
5 both of the streams in a Y-shaped ambush. And then the Regional Forces company would
6 go in, maybe two thousand meters from the SEAL position, and they would serve as
7 beaters and they would drive the Viet Cong into the ambush position. We did this several
8 times. It's called a "hammer-and-anvil" ambush. We had to be very careful because we
9 couldn't tell the Vietnamese until we were actually in the field of what we were doing
10 because we didn't want to compromise the SEALs' position. Once the Vietnamese
11 understood what they were doing, they were good at flushing the Viet Cong out and
12 driving them into the SEALs' ambush.

13 Also, the Regional Forces company had dogs that were born and bred in the
14 swamps, swamp dogs, which would usually alert us when they would uncover the Viet
15 Cong. These are some amazing dogs. They would eat rice and crab and fish. I don't think
16 they've ever been to see a vet, but they could stay up with us in the swamps, stay ahead
17 of us in the swamps actually.

18 KC: You mentioned that you wouldn't tell the Regional Forces where you were
19 going in order to maintain the integrity of the mission and things. Did you suspect that
20 there would be potential intelligence leaks if you did tell the RF where you were going?

21 DP: Yeah, we'd always assume there would be. It's better to assume that the
22 intelligence that the operation could be compromised and take measures to prevent it and
23 go ahead and unveil the entire plan. You don't know where that information is going to
24 go. I think that there were Viet Cong agents at Nha Be that were watching what we were
25 doing. I know they were listening in on our tactical radio frequency.

26 KC: How do you know that?

27 DP: Oh, they talked to us sometimes.

28 KC: Well, that's pretty obvious then. No kidding, what kind of things were they
29 saying?

30 DP: "Why are you here? The only reason the Vietnamese are fighting for you is
31 you give them Salem cigarettes. Don't you want to go home for Christmas? We hope you

1 enjoy our holiday, the Tet New Year. We just sank one of your ships. We're going to sink
2 one of your ships." Things like that.

3 KC: Just to kind of let you know that they're there. A little propaganda every once
4 in a while, something like that.

5 DP: Yeah, just a little psychological warfare. We could shift through their
6 frequencies, too, and pick up Viet Cong transmissions. They were usually down in the
7 really low numbers and they used alpha-numeric codes a lot. They didn't talk in the clear
8 very much.

9 KC: Did you ever suspect that there would have possibly been VC agents in the
10 RF units that you were with?

11 DP: I don't think in the RF units. Because these were all family men. They lived
12 just like simple peasants and they had their rice paddy or their fishing boat. You really
13 can't tell, but for the most part they appeared to me to be very genuine. Of course,
14 whenever we got into a firefight they weren't real reluctant to engage the Viet Cong. That
15 indicated to me that they were on the government's side.

16 KC: Right, well take me out on a typical mission with your Regional Forces
17 company. I mean, from the intelligence you're receiving to, we're going to go out and
18 patrol this area, take me on a mission with these guys. How do you get it going and what
19 kind of control do you assert? The whole thing, the whole shoot.

20 DP: Well, we would be alerted that there was going to be an operation and there
21 was usually one operation a week. We would get prepared the night before because we
22 would go out on the boats very early in the morning, sometimes 5:00 A.M, sometimes
23 and 4:00 A.M. These were landing craft that had been given to the Vietnamese Navy by
24 the U.S Navy. So we were basically in Papa boats. You could load the whole company
25 up in about four or five Papa boats. Then we would have escorting ships with us which
26 would be what they called "dynassault." These were from the French navy and these were
27 essentially gun boats that escorted us. We would go into the swamp and one of the things
28 that we had to really pay attention to was the tides. If you went up in a river and the tide
29 went out, you could get stranded up in there and would just become a sitting duck right in
30 the mud. You would have to wait until the next tide to get out of there. So you had to be
31 very aware of the tides. The Viet Cong were aware of it, too. They could read tide tables

1 as well. They were always looking to get us trapped up inside the river. The next thing
2 was to find a suitable landing, to actually get out of the boat and get ashore. You didn't
3 want to land where it was obviously a good place to land because that was where the Viet
4 Cong would set up either booby traps or an ambush or both. So we would have to have
5 the boats go up under some overhanging trees and we would climb out of the boats, climb
6 up on the trees, and then we would shimmy down to the ground on the bank. This took
7 some degree of time to get the company ashore and then we'd make sure we'd do a head
8 count once we got there. Then we would set off on our patrols. Most of the time we've
9 patrolled in column because the jungle was so thick and dense. We would try to get
10 into—we would look for trails, especially a trail that had fresh mud prints in it. We would
11 follow the mud prints into the Viet Cong camps. They weren't all camps. Sometimes
12 there would be just an empty lodging site that obviously had been there and left. There
13 would be a campfire. Or there would be an area that they stored supplies in. They would
14 store ammunition and rice. That was very valuable. Another thing was, was there's no
15 fresh water in the swamp. There was a number of springs. I'd have to take that back, that
16 there was none. There were some springs in the swamp which were invaluable supplies
17 of potable water. We had some old French maps which had the location of these springs
18 on the maps. We would try to get into the area of the springs because that would be
19 where most of the Viet Cong camps were in the vicinity off those springs. Usually when
20 we went into a camp, the Viet Cong would run and we would destroy the camp and tear
21 down the shelters, whatever they had there. Sometimes we would even capture sampans
22 that they had used. They would take off so quickly that they would leave their sampans
23 behind. We would then, in turn, take those and give them to the villagers of the 999th
24 village where the people had come from.

25 One of those things that was classified, and I don't know if it's classified now, but
26 the SEALs went in and poisoned some of these water wells. They had a chemical called
27 Dowgel. Which if you took a tablespoon full of Dowgel and put it into your canteen,
28 within a couple hours that canteen would turn into—the water in the canteen would turn
29 into a thick, jelly-like substance. The water couldn't be—you couldn't drink it. So they
30 would take the Dowgel and throw it into the spring. Then they would throw tear gas
31 grenades in there and just essentially render the water undrinkable for some time, for

1 several years. That really put a hurting on the Viet Cong. That meant in order for them to
2 get fresh water, they had to go out of the swamp which was very dangerous for them. As
3 long as they were in a swamp and had fresh water, they were very elusive and hard to
4 find. Once you destroyed the water source, they had to get out of there to get water. Now,
5 they could also get drain water, or correction, rain water and they had these large ceramic
6 55-gallon drums that they would collect the rain water in. Well, whenever we went into a
7 camp we would always bust up their rain barrels and often they were full of water. In
8 some respects it was a fight over a precious commodity, water.

9 KC: When you would encounter the VC in the Rung Sat, in the swamps, did they
10 employ a different type of approach to fighting? Relative to the swamps? Different than
11 what you would see further up outside the swamps and more traditional fighting, if you
12 would? Was there a special kind of swamp fighting that they practiced?

13 DP: They did not want to engage us at all because their mission was to harass
14 shipping on the main shipping channel and to put mines in the water and try to destroy
15 the ships because of the enormous amount of supplies that were going up the river. So,
16 they were more like sappers or UDT (underwater demolition teams) than they were
17 fighting guerrillas. They would fight if you cornered them, but essentially they would
18 run, they would bolt and try to get away from you.

19 KC: I see, that makes sense, that makes sense. So after you've gone through and
20 you've cleared out areas, little staging areas that they would have there, you would
21 mention if they left their sampans you would take the sampans and it would be basically
22 the spoils of war for the families of the Regional Forces. Was there anything else that you
23 would take from one of these places?

24 DP: Rice, of course, and if they had charcoal there for cooking we'd take the
25 charcoal. Anything that we could get in terms of intelligence value like maps or anything
26 like written material, we'd take that out. They really didn't have much and on several
27 occasions, we came across a small-arms factory where they were building mines and
28 hand grenades and we destroyed those. The Rung Sat had been an area that had been
29 inhabited by pirates. Clear back into the last two centuries. Pirates had operated in that
30 area and preyed upon commerce on the main shipping channel up to Saigon. Also, there
31 was lots of fish and shrimp in that area and crab. It was invaluable in terms of a fishing

1 reservoir and had been forever. Another thing was is that the crocodiles there, the skin off
2 the crocodiles could be used for leather. That was another product. Of course, the
3 charcoal factories would produce charcoal that would be sold locally in the villages.
4 There wasn't much—not many rice paddies It was all a swamp-oriented economy with
5 fishing and charcoal prominent.

6 KC: You mentioned that you came across these little factories, for lack of a better
7 word, that produced explosives, that were producing mines or grenades. Describe one of
8 those for me. How advanced was it?

9 DP: Well, they would build a furnace or pack mud to build a furnace and they
10 would have makeshift bellows made out of bamboo leaves. They would take—their
11 favorite metal was empty napalm canisters because they could shape those into just about
12 anything they wanted. They were very skilled at taking the aluminum napalm canisters
13 and turning them into pots and pans and cups and spoons and containers for explosives to
14 be used as land mines. It was all very primitive. Talk about some very clever industrious
15 intelligent people who have very good hand-eye coordination. They're used to making
16 something out of nothing.

17 KC: What was the quality of these devices?

18 DP: Well, they worked. For example, on the 21st of August, 1966, just after I got
19 there they sunk an 8,500 ton freighter in the Long Tao River. The SS *Baton Rouge*
20 *Victory* was coming up the river and the Viet Cong frogmen attached a large homemade
21 mine to the hull and was strung by electrical wire leading to the river bank where Viet
22 Cong sapper was hiding with a small portable electric generator, a hell box. Once the
23 frogmen were clear of the freighter, the sapper initiated the electrical charge and the mine
24 exploded and ripped a twelve by forty-five foot hole in a freighter's hull and killed seven
25 merchant seamen in her engine room. This is not as bad as what happened in Yemen to
26 the U.S.S *Cole*, but that freighter was in one of the narrowest parts of the river and the
27 captain wanted to make sure the freighter wasn't going to sink so he rammed it ashore
28 and basically blocked the main shipping channel up to Saigon. That particular mine was a
29 homemade mine out of the Rung Sat. I had to go down to the *Baton Rouge Victory* where
30 she was blocking the main shipping channel with the Regional Forces Company 999,
31 went down there to put a security perimeter on the bank of the river to protect the *Baton*

1 *Rouge* until she could be salvaged. I saw the bodies of these seven Americans that were
2 killed in the explosion brought ashore and put in body bags. A very gruesome sight.

3 KC: Sure.

4 DP: It was that particular incident, the *Baton Rouge Victory* was what triggered
5 the defoliation campaign from the high water mark of the river back one thousand meters.
6 Agent Orange and the Ranch Hands came in and sprayed that area and the defoliation
7 took effect. That did help in terms of safety on the river.

8 KC: Did you notice whether or not the Viet Cong would try to exploit a situation
9 like this? What I mean here is say they've stopped a ship. They've not necessarily sunk it,
10 but they disabled it and they stopped it there. Was there any effort to try to board ships, to
11 try to stay there and continue and fight and cause more damage and take lives or were
12 they just in the business stopping that ship, slowing down the traffic and then moving
13 out?

14 DP: Basically that; they didn't have the capability to do a force landing party raid
15 on the ship. They would have lost—well, if they'd come aboard, there was really no one
16 to stop them on the ships because it was just merchant ships. But all these ships came up
17 in the daylight and no merchant ship traffic on the river at night. No, they didn't have any
18 pirate ambitions to take over a ship.

19 KC: Right, so say you've gone out on this one sweep. You go out to the zone.
20 You either found something, you haven't found something, whichever the case may be
21 and you come back. You're going to go in for the night so you've been out on just one
22 day or whatever it is. You come back to the village, you're staying there. What's the next
23 step? Do you find an officer or a security officer that you brief about what you saw or
24 what you didn't see? What happens next?

25 DP: Well usually we would go out in the morning and we would come back in the
26 afternoon. Sometimes we would stay out overnight maybe one or two nights, but the men
27 wanted to get back to the village because that's where their families were and they
28 wanted to take care of their families because when they were gone, it was an ideal
29 opportunity for the Viet Cong to come into the village. So, we didn't stay in the swamp
30 that long. When the *Baton Rouge Victory* was run ashore, we stayed down there maybe
31 four nights until some other U.S personnel came in. We would come back and the first

1 priority was to get cleaned up. You were just covered in mud and your weapons were a
2 mess. Then the next day, after we had done the recovery time, I would go to—we had an
3 intelligence advisor, a Marine first lieutenant. He and I would get together with a map
4 and I would tell him everything I saw on everything that had happened on the patrol. I'm
5 not sure that the Vietnamese did a debrief when they came back off of patrol. Unless they
6 ran into something significant, unless they had overrun a camp or sprung an ambush or
7 something like that. I don't think they routinely did a debrief. Then that information was
8 collated with information provided by the SEALs and by the PBR (Patrol Boat, River)
9 sailors and by the mine sweeping sailors that were all located there at Nha Be. We had a
10 pretty good intelligence picture of what was going on in the swamp.

11 KC: You say that you also go an idea about what was going on in the PBR sailors
12 there.

13 DP: Yeah, see the PBR sailors operated at—well, they operated 24/7, but where
14 they were most valuable is they operated at night. What they would do is they would get
15 into a position and then they would drift on the river. They'd shut their engines down, but
16 they would keep their radar going and if they detected a sampan, they would crank up
17 their engines and give chase. One of the problems that the PBR had is there was a lot of
18 flotsam and jetsam in the river from palm fronds and mud and debris. There would be a
19 lot of junk in the water and that stuff would sometimes get caught up in the engines of the
20 PBRs which were nothing more than a Jacuzzi pump type of water propulsion system. As
21 a matter of fact, a water propulsion system was manufactured by Jacuzzi. That was
22 keeping the junk out of the system was an ongoing problem for the PBR sailors. These
23 PBR sailors, they knew the swamp, they knew the ins and outs, they knew the tides very
24 well, but they didn't go off the main shipping channel very much. They stayed on the
25 main shipping channel and that was their job to help keep it open.

26 KC: In what kind of capacity, if any, would you work with the PBR sailors?

27 DP: Well, because they were on the river, we didn't work with them very much.
28 Sometimes I would call and ask them for fire support and ask them to hose down a
29 riverbank where we were going to be inserted if that river bank was very close to that
30 main shipping channel. They didn't really have any indirect fire weapons. Well, they had
31 the 40 millimeter grenade launcher which was hand-cranked. I remember the first one

1 that was mounted on a boat with serial number 0001. That was quite innovative, with this
2 new 40 millimeter grenade launcher. Mostly they had M-60 machineguns and 50 caliber
3 machineguns which were flat trajectory weapons. So in terms of laying out some
4 suppression fire or reconnaissance fire on a river bank, that would be about the only time
5 I ever asked for help from them.

6 KC: What about in terms of intelligence? Were they able to provide you guys
7 with things that you needed to know?

8 DP: Say again, Kelly?

9 KC: I'm sorry, the intelligence. Were the PBR guys able to tell you things that
10 you needed to know?

11 DP: Not really, I think we knew more than they did because we were working
12 with the Vietnamese. One of the biggest sources of intelligence information was from the
13 district police chief. There were two districts in the Rung Sat government districts. I think
14 Can Tho and I can't remember the name of the other district. There were two district
15 chiefs in the Rung Sat. They had a small police force. It wasn't very much and most of
16 the police force stayed in the village. They had their contacts and we would get pretty
17 good information from the Vietnamese police as to activities at night on the rivers and
18 possible hiding places of the Viet Cong.

19 Now, there was another thing that we had that was classified at the time, but it's
20 not now. That was just we had the Army Mohawk Surveillance Aircraft. It had a FLIR in
21 it. Forward-looking infrared radar and it had a mapping system in it and they could fly
22 over the swamp and not at low level, they could fly fairly high over the swamp. This
23 FLIR would pick up camp fires in the swamp and it would also was so sensitive, it could
24 pick up the heat off of sampan engines. The Viet Cong would travel and sampan convoys
25 at night. So the Mohawk would pick up these heat signatures and in turn, they would call
26 Nha Be headquarters and give the grid coordinates of these blips that they had developed
27 on their infrared equipment and their aircraft. We would, in turn, launch Seawolf
28 helicopters, gunships that would fly at night to go out to wherever this sampan convoy
29 was and try to find it. Sometimes they would and shoot up the sampan convoy. Or we
30 would direct artillery fire at the camp fires and then go in the next day to see if we had hit
31 anything and what the source of the camp fire was. The Viet Cong, I don't think they

1 ever knew that that airplane had that capability. It was a turbine airplane. It was fairly
2 quiet. When I was out in the swamp, I could hear it at night. You never knew when it was
3 going to come over because it had a lot of other sites they had to do surveillance on every
4 night.

5 KC: Here's a question for someone who's completely and totally uninitiated to
6 this type of environment, thank goodness. What's it like to be out there in the middle of a
7 swamp at night?

8 DP: Well, the first thing is, you're wet. And so I always try to—I carried a Viet
9 Cong hammock which is much lighter and smaller than the U.S Army issue hammock. I
10 always tried to find a place where I could tie up my hammock. I could get off the ground
11 and get my feet dried out. Second thing was the mosquitos. They could really drive you
12 crazy and we were told, and I believe it, it was confirmed by the Viet Cong that they
13 could smell the GI issue mosquito repellent. So if you put the repellent on, the Viet Cong
14 could smell you and so what's a trade-off? You don't want the Viet Cong to smell you
15 and deal with the mosquitos or vice versa? I didn't use the mosquito repellent. Sometimes
16 it would get cold in the swamp, believe it or not. That was another factor. Also, you had
17 to be careful where you set up because the tide would come in and you'd find yourself
18 above a couple of feet of water. Also, the snakes in the swamp were not a big problem,
19 but they were always there and psychologically, it was always on your mind. The more
20 feared thing was the crocodiles. When we would go onto operation, sometimes you
21 would see them sunning on the bank of the river that you had gone up. There would be
22 maybe a dozen of them just lying there on the mud bank just sunning themselves. So, if
23 you were wounded and bleeding and went in the water with the crocodiles around, you
24 were history. That was a concern. Then, I always wanted to stay in radio contact, but you
25 couldn't leave the radio on all the time because you would drain your batteries down and
26 if you needed the radio, you wouldn't have enough battery power to run it. So, I would
27 set up times that I would come up on the radio. I wouldn't do it in an hour where you'd
28 normally expect it. I wouldn't do it at midnight because that was when the Viet Cong
29 would be listening because that would be the most probable time that we were going to
30 turn on our radio. So, I would pick out a time like somebody's, oh, birthday or let's say a
31 guy was born in '42, I'm going to come up on the radio at 4:20. Or he was born on the

1 Marine Corps birthday, I'm going to come up on 11:10 or something like that and just
2 very briefly say, "This is Leatherneck6, secure." That's all. Just let them know that you
3 are okay and then you shut down the radio right away. Now, if something happened
4 because sound carries a long way at night. You could hear the firing. Of course,
5 everybody would turn on their radios. If you heard a firefight break out. Sometimes there
6 would be another American with me, an enlisted man. We had some really good ones and
7 they would be the radio operators. And then at other times, be by myself. Which was
8 disconcerting at first, but then I got used to it because I would be right next to the
9 commander and his little command group. They would usually assign one soldier to keep
10 an eye on me. This would be an older guy, a veteran. I became friends with some of these
11 older soldiers. We'd eat with them when we got back to the village and so on. So I felt
12 secure in that respect, but it was kind of something you can't forget, let me put it that
13 way.

14 KC: What kind of effect does the environment have on your equipment, your
15 clothes, and your weapons? How do you deal with all those things?

16 DP: Well, one of the things I did was—and this may sound kind of gross, but we
17 all got, when we first got there, got crotch rot. It was very difficult to keep yourself clean.
18 Later, my body adapted to the environment and I didn't have any problems with that. I
19 didn't wear any underwear underneath my jungle uniform because it just kept me damp
20 longer. At night, if I was in a very secure position where I could take off my uniforms
21 and I'd put on a bathing suit. I had to be careful around the Vietnamese because they're
22 very modest people and they would never expose themselves to each other. I took my .45
23 caliber pistol, I took the ammunition magazines and coated them in Vaseline and then
24 inserted them into condoms, two or three condoms, and then I tied the tops to the
25 condoms and then I put these Vaseline-covered magazines back into my magazine
26 carrier. I also carried a 30 caliber carbine, M-2. It's the small carbine. The Vietnamese
27 were issued this carbine and also American advisors. I'm a little guy and this carbine fit
28 me just right as far as shooting stance and sight picture. It contained a thirty-round
29 magazine. I would take a thirty-round magazine and duct tape two of them back to back
30 so I had sixty rounds of ammunition that I could fire just by flipping the magazine over. I
31 would take—one magazine I would have tracers in to mark for air strikes. Which was one

1 in four count on the tracers. If you run pure tracers it will burn out the barrel of the
2 weapon very quickly. One in four was tracers in one of the magazines. The carbine was
3 easy to disassemble and keep clean. I always kept a toothbrush in my shirt pocket to take
4 care of the carbine if we got into mud. I was always careful. I always tried to keep my
5 weapon as clean as possible. It was difficult when you were wading the canals. I've got
6 pictures of guys in the canals. You can see somebody holding their M-16 out of the
7 water. He can't even see the guy walking on the bottom of the canal or the river getting
8 across it. I think the dampness was a big thing. A couple of years ago, I opened up a
9 locker box that had some jungle uniforms in it and it smelled like the Rung Sat. It doesn't
10 go away, it was still there.

11 KC: What kind of effect did that have on you having smelled this for the first time
12 in thirty-some odd years?

13 DP: Well, at first it was kind of shocking. I guess the sensitivity and smell is such
14 that it can evoke, really, a poignant or terrible memory. In this sense, I just said, "I can't
15 get away from this." I took all those uniforms and so on and I burned them, I got rid of
16 them. I didn't want to smell that again. Yeah, it was a wakeup call when I opened up the
17 old locker box and since got rid of it, too. I had jungle boots and jungle utilities in there
18 and so on. It took me back to Vietnam, that's for sure.

19 KC: I bet that it did. I often times hear that about the sense of smell is the one
20 thing that really drives those memories home and can bring it back to you pretty quickly.
21 All right, now you're talking about the equipment that you had. What about the
22 equipment that the RFs would have? You mentioned they would have the M-2?

23 DP: Yeah, they had all the Second World War infantry weapons. They had M-
24 1s—they had M-2s. They didn't have any M-1s because they're semi-automatic. They
25 had the M-1 Garands, they had BARs (Browning automatic rifle), and they had belt-fed
26 machineguns. Not water-cooled, but the belt fed. A helmet, no flak jacket, grenades,
27 Mark-26 grenades. Occasionally we could get some mines for them. They really didn't
28 use the mines very much in the swamp because of the water. The Vietnamese are very
29 strong. Although, they don't have the upper body proportion that we do like the arm-
30 pumping guys, they are extremely strong and can do, oh, like rowing a sampan against
31 the tide or going up stream in a sampan. These little guys can row like galley slaves or

1 digging trench lines or reeling up buckets of water out of a well or chopping, chopping
2 down a tree or chopping down a stand of bamboo. They had a resiliency that used to
3 amaze me that they're so strong and can outwork just about anybody.

4 KC: I guess part of it would be—at least part of it would be a life or something
5 that's pretty common for that kind of repetitive and labor where you continually work on
6 these muscles and they're used to it.

7 DP: A lot of their work was labor intensive and chopping wood is a good
8 example. I always said they had the power and weight ratio of ants. Although, they
9 probably couldn't beat the American SEAL at arm wrestling, they could sure as heck stay
10 ahead of him in a swamp.

11 KC: Right, and for a smaller size would be a big problem as well, I would think.
12 What about rations? What do you take with you? Or do you just live on what you find out
13 there? You said there was a lot of crab, a lot of fish, a lot of shrimp.

14 DP: Well, I had to eat with the Vietnamese, but I would take some canned fruit
15 with me. We had C-rations if we wanted them. I would take the canned fruit. This may
16 sound funny, but there was some peanut brittle that you could buy in a village
17 marketplace. It was absolutely delicious. I would get this peanut brittle that I would wrap
18 up in aluminum foil and I would keep for a pick me up if I started to get hungry or I
19 started to feel like my blood sugar was down, I would eat this peanut brittle. I would try
20 to keep some high-calorie food on me at all times. Especially if I thought—if I thought I
21 was going to get in the case where we got into a big fight and I got separated and I was
22 by myself, I was going to need some food. That's why I would carry that. But, mostly I
23 ate with the Vietnamese and they would eat in a communal fashion and always rice. I
24 think I described their menu before. And also, we would catch things out in the swamp
25 and throw a grenade into the water and watch all the fish float to the top. There they are.
26 Or catch some crabs and build a fire and cook the crabs over the fire. A snake, pregnant
27 snake is a feast. If you've got the eggs, you can make a little omelet. So, there was never
28 a lack of food. Of course, I had to share their food, share their danger, and share their
29 sleeping arrangements and so on.

1 KC: I remember before you were talking about the cultural importance of being
2 one of them. To get them to trust you and take part in their daily lives. Whether that's
3 eating or whatever it may be.

4 DP: Well, one of the things that the Vietnamese respect is good manners. They
5 ascribe a high degree of value to personal relationships being very polite. Another thing
6 that they respect is calmness and remaining quiet and not showing any emotion is the
7 best. So the more stoic you were and the more quiet and reserved you were, the easier it
8 was to get along with the Vietnamese. Having been born and raised in Arizona with cattle
9 people, stockmen, and construction men and so on, that was one of the traits that I grew
10 up with, too. Keep your mouth shut and don't say anything unless it's really important,
11 above all, don't complain. If you've got beans on your plate, just eat. That kind of a
12 Western tradition, especially outdoor tradition. And so I was able to do that very easily.
13 Some of the things they did I couldn't participate. For example, they would smoke
14 opium, some of the older ones. They would ask me if I wanted to try opium. I would tell
15 them, "No, it makes me sick." That was it, closed issue. They wouldn't press me on it
16 even further. They also—a lot of the Vietnamese males, especially the senior officers had
17 girlfriends. I don't know if they had learned it from the French to have a mistress or
18 whether it was part of their culture. There was a lot of infidelity and it was pretty much
19 accepted. So they would ask me if I wanted a girlfriend. I said, "No, I have a girlfriend in
20 the United States." That would be it. I took that as a compliment that they would think
21 about me in those terms. That they would be interested in my libido.

22 Most of the advisors that got into problems with the Vietnamese were the ones
23 that tried to give advice about everything. Or the ones who said, "Well, that's not the way
24 to do it." That kind of an approach. You were just another advisor. There'd been one
25 there before and there was going to be one after you. You could help them in some
26 respect, especially in calling in naval gunfire or helicopter gunships or getting a medevac
27 helicopter or getting a resupply chopper or something like that. You were invaluable in
28 that respect and really what you were was a fire support coordination officer and not an
29 advisor when you did things like that. At the same time, they wanted us there, they liked
30 us. We also were a good source for a PX run if they wanted a camera or a fountain pen
31 from the PX, they would ask you if they could buy something from the PX for them. I

1 wouldn't do that. I would tell them that I already allotted my rations for the camera and
2 the TV and I didn't have anything left. But some advisors, to get in good with the
3 Vietnamese, buy them things from the post exchange in Saigon in exchange for a medal
4 sometimes.

5 KC: In exchange for a medal?

6 DP: Yeah, Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry or some Mickey Mouse medal like that.

7 KC: So it wasn't just a matter of trying to gain friendship and earn their trust, it
8 would also maybe something a little untoward, I guess.

9 DP: Yeah, *quid pro quo* relationship. You know, the Vietnamese didn't respect an
10 advisor who would do something like that. But that kind of chicanery goes on in the
11 Vietnamese society. You know, the black market and the corruption and so on, is pretty
12 much accepted.

13 KC: You mentioned a moment ago that some of the least successful—I'm kind of
14 putting words in your mouth, it's not exactly what you said, but that some advisors would
15 offer advice on everything. That you had to take a different kind of perspective on when
16 to offer advice and when not to. When you draw the line? What was acceptable and what
17 was not acceptable for you, personally, to feel that you were being the most effective
18 advisor you could be?

19 DP: My bottom line was, before I would give them some advice, number one, will
20 they take this advice? And if they do take the advice, will it make a difference? So when
21 you set up those two criteria, there's not much that you can tell them. Sometimes it will
22 be so obvious what has to be done, that you've got to just wait to see if they will go ahead
23 and do it in the way that you're thinking about. Sometimes it would come about location.
24 Where are we in the swamp? They're trying to figure out, "Well, we just crossed this
25 stream. Isn't that this stream on the map?" And then it turns out, no, it wasn't that stream
26 on the map. Meanwhile, I would ask for a Bird Dog to come and then I would give them
27 a flash with my mirror and then I would ask them to give me an approximate location of
28 where we were. I had to be careful with that because we had to encrypt it because he
29 didn't want to give my grid coordinates in the clear. So that took some time. Sometimes
30 he would just say, "On the clock with the north being noon." He would say, "Long Tau is
31 at your one o'clock, fifteen hundred meters." So, we'd pretty much know about where we

1 were. That would be helpful to the Vietnamese in that way. Or, helping get a medevac or
2 if the Vietnamese were having trouble communicating then I could call the advisor at the
3 higher headquarters level where the Vietnamese are trying to communicate to and tell the
4 advisor that my buddy was trying to talk to his boss. That would be the senior advisor's
5 counterpart. So try to keep them in communication at all times. That was another task
6 that they appreciated.

7 KC: Did you ever offer advice that they did not need?

8 DP: Yeah, yeah. Oh, I can remember one where I wanted to make up some safe
9 conduct passes that we were going to drop in the river or in the swamp. I wanted to put a
10 picture of a Vietnamese boat on the leaflet and tell the Viet Cong that they could
11 surrender to this boat by waving the leaflet above their head from the canal bank. The
12 Vietnamese rejected that and they said they didn't want to provide a picture of their boat
13 to the Viet Cong. Which I understood. I thought it was a pretty good idea, but they didn't
14 accept it at all. That was just one little incidence.

15 Another thing is I tried to get them to set up a midwife's facility in the village and
16 we had a program up in Saigon where we could train midwives and then they could come
17 back to the village and help in the birth of children. Well, they didn't want to do that
18 because they didn't want the women to go up to Saigon and be away from the family.

19 Another was there were children in the swamp that had open cleft palates. There
20 was a German hospital ship that tied up in Saigon called the *Helgoland*. They specialized
21 in closing cleft palates. I wanted to take a child up to *Helgoland* and get his face fixed.
22 You know, he's got this open cleft palate, very ugly. He's going to be stuck with this for
23 the rest of his life and here's an ideal situation to get this surgery done, cosmetic surgery
24 and make him look halfway decent. Well, the Viet Cong said that the way the French do
25 that is they cut off the little boy's penis and they sew it into his mouth to fix the cleft
26 palate. Somehow the Vietnamese believed this. So finally I was able to get a little girl
27 with a cleft palate and took her up. The grandmother was the most influential in this and
28 she went with the girl and stayed aboard the ship while the little girl was operated on. We
29 took before and after pictures of her and she came back to the village and she was happy.
30 The grandmother was delighted with the surgery. Once the people saw this, they said,
31 "Oh okay, now we can send some more kids up there." Trying to overturn the peasant's

1 perspective of or enlighten the peasant's perspective of medical care. Of course, these are
2 people that are still using home remedies at this time and still do.

3 KC: You said that you were able to get a number of children medical care for cleft
4 palate. How many of them were there in this village?

5 DP: Oh, let's see.

6 KC: It must have been a pretty high number, I would think.

7 DP: Yeah, and I think it was a genetic thing in the swamp. I had that written
8 down.

9 KC: I don't need a hard and fast number. I just thought maybe you had some sort
10 of ballpark idea. That's kind of strange that there would be so many. Like you said,
11 genetics.

12 DP: I'd say we did about a dozen of them.

13 KC: Really? Wow.

14 DP: But the word got out that the operation was successful; the food was good.
15 They had Vietnamese cooks aboard the hospital ship that prepared the food. They were
16 very comfortable aboard the ship. Once that happened then it wasn't so hard to get a kid
17 to go up and get his face fixed.

18 Another thing we did is there's an institution known as the Catholic Relief
19 Society. Also, there's the United States Agency for International Development and Care.
20 All of them had offices up at Saigon. I was able to go up there, especially from the
21 Catholic Relief Society I would get rice and cornmeal, rolls wheat, bulgur wheat,
22 cooking oil, salt, powdered milk. I'd also get these kits: toilet article kits, sewing kits,
23 tool kits, a carpenter's kit with all the basic tools that a carpenter can use. Food:
24 condensed milk, canned soup, candy, canned beans, vitamins, cookies. The tin roof. Tin
25 roofing was a big one for the village school. Dehydrated eggs, canned biscuits,
26 toothbrushes, toothpaste, toys, soft drink mix, baby food. School supplies was another big
27 one. Cement, lanterns, pajamas, transistor radios, and so on. If you could show the
28 agency, especially the Catholic Relief Society, that you were actually delivering these
29 into the hands of the villagers, they would go all out with you. The big concern was this
30 stuff was going to end up on the black market. When we would do these deliveries to the
31 village, we would take pictures. Some of the stuff did end up on the black market,

1 especially the transistor radios, which were worth quite a bit of money. By and large, all
2 these things that were given to me to give to the Vietnamese ended up in the right place.
3 And so that was a big, oh, that was a big program where they could see that the
4 Americans were truly interested in their welfare and were generous people.

5 Another thing I discovered is that the SEALs had some mines and the containers
6 that the mines came in were ideally shaped as water containers so the Vietnamese could
7 set these containers out under the eaves of the roof of their house and could collect the
8 rainwater. They really liked these containers.

9 Also, the ammunition ships would tie up, as I told you a couple days ago, they
10 would tie up in Nha Be anchorage and then the ships would offload the ammunition into
11 barges and the barges would shuttle the ammunition up the river to Saigon port. We could
12 not let the ammunition ship go up in the vicinity of Saigon. Inside the ship was dunnage
13 lumber that was used to keep the bombs and rockets and ammunition containers in place.
14 So we had all this dunnage lumber and I would go out to the ammo ship when I saw it
15 being offloaded and talked to the captain and told them that we would take this dunnage
16 lumber off his hands and we would use it to build a school or build a dispensary or a
17 bridge in the village. The villagers need a bridge and we could use this wood. They'd say,
18 "Sure, take it." Because they didn't want it. They had no need for it. I was able to get the
19 Papa boats to come over and get the 999th Company to come over. "If you guys want this
20 lumber, come and get it." They would climb down to the holds of the ship and haul the
21 lumber out. We were able to have a lot of projects using this dunnage lumber. It turned
22 out in the 999th Company, there were several men that were very good carpenters. They
23 could build just about anything out of that dunnage lumber.

24 KC: That's really interesting. You mentioned a little bit ago that you would go out
25 maybe once a week. I was going to ask you, what are you doing with the rest of the time
26 that you are there? It sounds like these types of projects for something that would have
27 required some of your time. Was this something that was frowned upon? Something that
28 was encouraged by your superiors?

29 DP: Well, I worked for a Marine major who would let me do anything. Just as
30 long as we were interfacing with the Vietnamese trying to improve relations, that was
31 good. That's what I always tried to do. The navy commander who was the senior officer

1 in the Rung Sat zone, he approved of it, too. A Naval Academy graduate, a really nice
2 guy. So they just let me do whatever I wanted to do.

3 KC: Hmm, very interesting.

4 DP: Another thing that I found, and I can't remember the name of the
5 organization, but it was an organization from France that dealt it prosthetic devices.
6 Artificial limbs, hearing aids, and glass eyes. I think it was the National Institute of
7 Recovery for wounded soldiers and civilians. I was able to get a prosthetic device for one
8 of the members of 999 who had his leg blown off. I was also able to get from the Catholic
9 Relief Society, a sewing machine. So this wounded soldier became a tailor, became a
10 village tailor with a foot-powered sewing machine. He could operate it with the one foot
11 he still had and then he got the artificial limb. Those are very visible projects where
12 everybody in the village knew that Captain Price was instrumental in doing this.

13 Then whenever I'd go up to Saigon I'd always go the PX and get some candy and
14 take it back and give it to the kids in the village. My nickname was Dai Uy Candy,
15 Captain Candy.

16 KC: How much of your time was spent training, if any of your time training the
17 Regional Forces?

18 DP: The Regional Forces would not train. They said, "Why should we train when
19 we already go out on operations? Our operations are our training." That was hard to argue
20 with and I didn't even try. They said, "You know, if we train, we might as well go on our
21 operation. Besides, if we go out one or two days a week, that's one or two days that we're
22 not fishing or we're not taking care of our rice paddy or taking care of village business."

23 I did train myself. There was a SEAL team there and I got to know the SEALs
24 and so I would work out with them in the mornings, they would do their calisthenics in
25 the morning and I would workout with them. Then I would—I always found something
26 do to, but we didn't do anything on Sundays. That was the day you take malariapills and
27 just kick back, but I always seemed to have one project or another. Something going on.

28 KC: Now, you say you would go out on these operations once, maybe twice. You
29 said usually once per week. Why was it just this number? Were you under any pressure to
30 go out on further operations? Was that the number that everyone has decided was the
31 right number? Of course, did that number change throughout your time there?

1 DP: That was just the average time that the company would go out. I did a lot of
2 flying, though, and I was dropping leaflets out of helicopters and being a forward
3 observer. We had some U.S Army unit that came in and operated in the swamp. The 199th
4 Light Infantry Brigade. I did a lot of flying and support of that brigade while I was
5 operating in the swamp. We had our slack time, yeah, so it was a lot of volleyball played
6 in the afternoon starting about three o'clock. You know, you're not going anywhere. It's
7 not like you're on liberty. It's not like you're in Saigon, and you're stuck there on this
8 spit of land between these two big rivers. As I said, I could always find something to do
9 to benefit to the Vietnamese or to our command as a whole.

10 KC: Well, a while ago you were talking about this ship being attacked and
11 coming up the channel. You mentioned that this was the reason why a thousand yards of
12 defoliation would take place on the Ranch Hand operations. You were there in the heart
13 of the delta there when these Ranch Hand operations were taking place. Did you suffer
14 from any sort of injuries or any sort of illnesses related to the Agent Orange Ranch Hand
15 operations?

16 DP: I think so. Later on I had to go—well, I developed these polyps in my armpits
17 which had to be removed surgically. Then later on I had to undergo colon cancer and my
18 surgeon, this was at the naval hospital, said he couldn't prove it, but he thought it was
19 related to Agent Orange. Quite a number of my friends have had health problems that are
20 related to Agent Orange. I could never see any real cause and effect. I was really exposed
21 to a lot of it, too. I remember one time a C-123 Ranch Hand flew right over the top of 999
22 and sprayed us. It was a mistake, but it came down like kerosene rain right on top of us.

23 KC: What was that like? What was the smell, what's the taste, what kind of affect
24 does it have on you?

25 DP: It smells like kerosene, but later it was kind of slippery, too. Later when the
26 WD-40 came on the market, I said, "Shit, this isn't WD-40; this is Agent Orange."

27 KC: Huh, I'll be darned. What about the local effects of the Agent Orange spray?
28 Was it something that affected the village in a negative way in the fact that it essentially
29 poisoned foliage and everything and ground to water runoff and these types of things?
30 Did it affect the villages in a negative way?

1 DP: Oh yeah, and it really works. What it does is it speeds up the growing process
2 of the tree and makes the vegetation go through its complete lifecycle in just a couple of
3 months and they die. I didn't see any cause and effect relationship as far as health runoff
4 or poison or anything like that from the Agent Orange while I was there. Of course, since,
5 research has proved that that has led to birth defects and so on. Some of the people who
6 lived in a swamp objected to it. They didn't want it, but the mission was to get the
7 supplies up to Saigon and they were simply overridden. The defoliation program went
8 ahead and it did help. The Viet Cong could no longer hide on the river bank. Some did;
9 they can improvise as usual and they would wear camouflage clothing which essentially
10 would look like mud. They would make their way out onto the river banks, but they were
11 easier to spot and uncover than before when all the foliage and trees were on the river
12 bank. I've since gone back to Rung Sat and all that Agent Orange defoliation program,
13 you can't tell it from the river bank. All the vegetation and all the growth is back.

14 KC: My understanding is it doesn't take the jungle long to reclaim what's been
15 taken away.

16 DP: Yeah.

17 KC: We've spent quite a bit of time here with you and the 999th Company in the
18 Rung Sat. I don't want to get out before you're ready to leave. So is there anything else
19 about your time here that you think is or that you would like to get on the record? Were
20 you here for this whole tour until '67?

21 DP: Yeah, I was there for the, oh, let's see. That was about it. We did a lot of
22 building. We built the barracks for the 999th with the lumber dunnage that we got. I was
23 there from June 15, 1966, until May 20, 1967.

24 KC: Okay, and you spent your entire time there?

25 DP: I wanted—maybe we ought to wrap it up now because at that point, I
26 extended in-country for six months and I went up to I Corps up to Da Nang and joined
27 the 1st Marine Division where I took command of a rifle company.

28 KC: Okay, a bit more of a traditional six months tour.

29 DP: Right, exactly, and I wanted to do that. I was an infantry officer so I had to do
30 that in order to—well, my peers were doing it for one thing, and I wasn't ready to come
31 home. I was ready to go up there and command a rifle company. Of course, at that time if

1 you extended for six months in-country, you got thirty days of free leave anyplace you
2 wanted to go in the world.

3 KC: And where did you want to go?

4 DP: I wanted to go home to Arizona. I was tired at that time, also. Twelve,
5 thirteen months in Vietnam. I just wanted to go back and see my mom and my little
6 brother and do a little trout fishing and kick back.

7 KC: Well, let me ask you just a few more questions here, Colonel, before we get
8 you out of the Rung Sat. You know that you've got this one year tour that's coming to an
9 end. Did you give any thought to saying, "You know what, I am Vietnam'ed out. I want
10 to go home for good." Did you give that any consideration?

11 DP: No, and I guess I was naïve or too idealistic, but I liked the Vietnamese
12 people, I really did and I still do. I thought if they are willing to fight the Viet Cong for
13 their country, that I would help them. Plus—and this may sound really dumb, but it was a
14 good way to save money because there was no place to spend it over there. I didn't spent
15 any time in Saigon and all the money was tax free. We were getting combat pay as well
16 as I was drawn flight pay at that time, too. As a young captain it was a good way to build
17 up your bank account and buy a new Corvette when you got home completely.

18 KC: Did your decision to extend for another six months, did this have anything to
19 do with your career aspirations? You said that the guys who you were in with, your peers
20 were doing it. Did you think this may have been something leading an infantry unit and
21 leading an infantry company would be something you have to mark off your list in order
22 to progress in the Marine Corps? Was that part of your plan?

23 DP: Yeah, I hate to use the term, but it was called ticket punching. If you want to
24 be an infantry battalion commander you've got to be an infantry company commander at
25 one point. After six months I was ordered to Quantico to the Amphibious Warfare
26 School. That's where most of my peers were. A lot of them were at my class in my
27 Amphibious Warfare School. So it was one of those doors that you have to go through in
28 terms of career. There are some guys, they didn't want to get near a rifle company
29 because that was a place where captains got killed.

30 KC: You know, I think the phrase, "Ticket punching" has got a very negative
31 connotation among many Vietnam veterans.

1 DP: It is.

2 KC: I think there's ticket punching and then there's ticket punching. If you're
3 going to be a career Marine, you've already served basically a tour and a half in Vietnam
4 fighting with Viet Cong in the Rung Sat Special Zone. I don't think anybody can accuse
5 you for being one of those no good ticket-punching officers who just wanted to climb up
6 the ladder. I must say that your reputation should have been safe, all things considered
7 there. What about—and after this I'll stop for the day. What kind of toll did your work
8 and that tour in the Rung Sat, what kind of toll did it take on you physically, what kind of
9 toll did it take on your mentally?

10 DP: Well, I lost a lot of weight when I was operating down there, but I never got
11 really sick. Some guys got—like this major that I worked for, he was in the hospital [3rd
12 Field] up in Saigon for a month and they never could figure out what was wrong with
13 him. He was suffering from FUO, fever undetermined origin. He looked like he escaped
14 from Auschwitz when he got out of the hospital. I mean, he was really thin.

15 Physically, it was the weight loss, but at the same time a workout. You couldn't
16 go out and run because if you ran on the road, if you did that every day, pretty soon the
17 Viet Cong knew this stupid American is jogging down the road. It's a good way for a
18 sniper to ding him. You couldn't run, but you could run in place. We had a shed a Conex
19 box that we had some weights in. We would lift weights and then do calisthenics with the
20 SEALs in the morning. So we stayed physically in good shape. I was anxious to get up to
21 I Corps and join a regular infantry Marine unit. I don't know if I changed. Maybe I did,
22 but I don't think so. I say that having a master's degree in psychology. The Marine Corps
23 sent me on a sabbatical later. I saw guys change, believe me. I saw guys who absolutely
24 hated the Vietnamese and disliked Vietnam and wanted nothing to do with it after that,
25 but I got along well with them. Some of the guys said the Vietnamese were always dirty.
26 Well, no they're not. If they have soap and water, they're some of the cleanest people you
27 can be around. The circumstances they live in is just very difficult to keep up the
28 American standard of hygiene.

29 KC: And it sounds like your overall motivation for being there is still pretty good.
30 Maybe you were naïve or whatever, but that you still believed that the Vietnamese were
31 trying to fight off the Viet Cong. That you wanted to help him do so. So it sounds like

1 your overall understanding and motivation were still in place for another six months at
2 least, I would say.

3 DP: This is not empirical data at all, but when I first got to the Rung Sat, flying
4 over the Rung Sat and the areas adjacent to the Rung Sat, I noticed that some of the
5 villages and some of the houses were being built and they were putting tile roofs on the
6 homes instead of the traditional thatch. What that meant to me is that the Vietnamese
7 owner of that house had enough confidence in the Vietnamese government to protect
8 them from a Viet Cong mortar attack or he wouldn't have put that expensive tile roof on
9 that house. Over the twelve, thirteen months that I was there, I saw more and more tile
10 roofs in the villages. Now, that may be dumb, but I noticed that and that was in contrast
11 to 1963 when I saw very few tile roofs in the villages. That was an indication on some
12 degree of security and it was an indication to some degree of prosperity.

13 KC: Yes, I was going to mention that as well. Why don't we stop there for today,
14 Colonel?

15 DP: Okay.

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1 **Session [4] of [9]**

2 **Date: 11 November 2010**

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4 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with
5 Colonel Don Price. Today is November 11, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Colonel
6 Price is joining me again, via telephone, from his home in Sierra Vista, Arizona. Colonel,
7 when we last left off you had just finished your tour there in the Rung Sat. Obviously you
8 had requested and been accepted for a six-month extension to lead a company up in I
9 Corps. You said that before you did that you really wanted to come back home to
10 Arizona. You wanted to see your family, you wanted to do some fly fishing. Tell me
11 about that time back in Arizona, the month that you had home before you came back to
12 Vietnam.

13 Donald Price: Well, it was a time to reflect on what was going on and, of course,
14 the anti-war movement was taking off. There had been demonstrations at the Pentagon
15 and there was a lot of anti-war sentiment in the country. It didn't bother me. I knew what
16 I was doing and I thought I was doing the right thing. Basically, if the Vietnamese people
17 wanted to fight for their independence I was going to help them.

18 I did physical conditioning when I was home. I tried to put on some weight and I
19 had a book about the rifle company tactics that I reviewed and read. I had read it before,
20 but I had reviewed it again in preparation for taking over the rifle company. But it was
21 just a laid back time up in Flagstaff, Arizona.

22 KC: Was there anything in particular that you wanted to do?

23 DP: No, not really, just relax. I wanted to reassure my mother that I would be
24 okay, that I would be back in six months. Luckily I did come back, of course. My
25 younger brother at the time had joined the Air Force and he was headed for Thailand. I
26 patiently explained to her the difference between Thailand and Vietnam so she could see
27 that both of her sons were not going to be in harm's way.

28 KC: What was your mom's reaction or your family's reaction in general when
29 you said, "I'm going back after this month. I'm going to be away again."?

30 DP: My mother was a very stoic woman and she didn't say much. My dad had
31 been a Sea Bee during the Second World War and had gone away for two years. The

1 people in Arizona, especially Northern Arizona were very patriotic and they're very
2 accepting of military service. My mom was proud that I had graduated from college and
3 was a Marine captain. She said, "You've got to do what you've got to do." Basically,
4 that's the way we went.

5 KC: You talked about the anti-war protests that were beginning to take shape in
6 the country. What was your opinion of that?

7 DP: Well, to be honest they seemed misinformed. It was like they were having
8 fun protesting, but they really didn't know what they were protesting. I visited the
9 campus at my alma mater, Northern Arizona University, and there were some students
10 there that were in the anti-war movement and I talked to a few of them. You can really
11 ask them fundamental questions like, "Where is Vietnam? What countries border
12 Vietnam? What is the population of Vietnam? What is the ethnic background of the
13 Vietnamese?" Of course, I knew all these things because I had gone through the MATA
14 course and I had studied Vietnam. "How long were the French in Vietnam? How long
15 were the Chinese in Vietnam? What is the Geneva Accords? What happened at the Battle
16 of Dien Bien Phu?" They could not answer those questions. They were shrieking anti-war
17 phrases and that was about it. I thought they were hollow, but they were having fun
18 protesting.

19 KC: I guess that's something, huh? All right, your month is drawing to an end
20 there in Arizona and you're heading back. I would assume that given your personality
21 and given what you wanted to do with it before, you were looking forward to going. Is
22 that the case?

23 DP: I certainly was.

24 KC: Describe that trip over for me. How did you get back to Vietnam the second
25 time?

26 DP: Well, we flew on a charter airline. I can't remember the name of it. Most of
27 the guys can remember, but I think it was World Airways. They flew us—we went out of
28 Travis Air Force Base outside of San Francisco. I went into Elmendorf, Alaska, landed in
29 Japan, and then onto Da Nang. We flew right into that old French airfield there at Da
30 Nang. I had passed through there in 1963 when I was an OJT. And we got off the plane
31 and there was a group of Marines that were leaving. I looked them over and they were

1 really what we'd say in the Marine Corps, they were "salty," meaning their uniforms
2 were sun bleached, their utility caps were ragged, and their hair was a little long. They
3 were wearing jungle boots that were well worn down, scuffed. They had no place to sit
4 and they were just lying on the ground there sleeping and getting ready to go home. Some
5 of them had a hollow appearance and most of them had the "grunt sunburn" where their
6 neck is sunburned or dark brown and then their face is brown from just above the
7 eyebrows down because the helmet protects the forehead from the sun because you had a
8 white forehead. I could tell that they had been in the bush a lot. I looked at them very
9 closely and some of them were yelling at us, "You'll be sorry." I knew that they were just
10 kidding and there was no big deal. We flew into the same airfield, the old French airfield
11 which is jet capable.

12 From there we were put on trucks and taken up to the 1st Marine Division
13 headquarters which was up on a hill behind Da Nang. It overlooked Da Nang and the hill
14 was commonly called "Division Hill." We checked in there and I checked in with the
15 division adjutant. It just so happened that there was a clerk there who we had been in the
16 same battalion together on Okinawa, 3rd Battalion, and 3rd Marines. He was a sergeant by
17 this time and he recognized me and we greeted each other. He said, "What are you doing
18 here?" I said, "Well, I just extended in-country to get a rifle company." He told me, he
19 said, "Don't ask for the 5th Marines because there's captains in line there to get
20 companies. Ask for the 7th Marines and you'll get a company."

21 Before I extended in country I went to Saigon and there was a deputy J-3 there, a
22 brigadier general. I can't remember his name right now. He later died of a heart attack at
23 the Pentagon Officers Athletic Club. I made a courtesy call on him and told him I wanted
24 to extend in-country and he said, "Okay, when you get to Da Nang, if you don't get your
25 rifle company, you call me and I'll take care of it." I didn't have to call him. This buck
26 sergeant that I had known from before was able to help get me into the 7th Marines right
27 away.

28 I was only there at the division headquarters one night and stayed in a hardback
29 tent and went to the officers club there. I saw all these captains in the club. I was
30 wondering what the hell's going on here? The 7th Marines need rifle company
31 commanders and these guys are out here drinking beer. And so I started talking to a few

1 of them, and I'll never forget this one guy was a psychological operations officer. That
2 was his job. He really liked it and I could tell he had a bunker mentality that I'd never see
3 him in the bush. So I was glad to get away from division headquarters the next day.

4 The battalion sent a Jeep and a flak jacket. One of the things that happened at
5 division is I was issued a new set of jungle utilities, new jungle boots, a new hat,
6 everything. So I looked like a new guy in country. Which was fine with me. I didn't care.
7 But when I arrived at the battalion, they did not know I already had been in country for
8 thirteen months. The only one who saw that was the battalion adjutant. He and I became
9 good friends, his name is John Currence and the battalion commander at the time was
10 Lieutenant Colonel J.D. Rowley. He was an amphibious tracker officer, but the
11 commanding general thought so highly of him he gave him an infantry battalion. He was
12 a good battalion commander. I explained to him that I had extended in-country to get the
13 company. He said, "Okay, I've got a company for you. It's got some problems and I want
14 you to straighten them out." What else could I say, but, "Yes, sir."

15 At that time, the battalion was on Hill 10. Its mission was to prevent rocket
16 attacks on what they called the Da Nang vital area which was really the airport. The NVA
17 were infiltrating into the area and they were firing rockets at the airfields. They had 107,
18 122 millimeter, and 140 millimeter rockets. All he had to do was take a couple of pieces
19 of bamboo and cross them, tie them together and then stick it into the bank of a rice
20 paddy and fire the rocket toward the airfield. You know, that was the way they hit it.
21 They hit the airfield. They just used a compass and laid it out on a Y or sling shot-shaped
22 wooden frame and fired the rocket that way. Very simple, very primitive, but very
23 effective. They could man pack the rocket into the area and they would fire and Da Nang
24 would go to general quarters and they would hit buildings down there and aircraft and so
25 on. So our job was to prevent rocket attacks by saturation patrolling. They'd put out
26 patrols that put out ambushes every night. That was the mission of the battalion.

27 KC: Let me ask you a few questions here before we get you out on some of these
28 patrols because this is really good stuff. So you're going to go to which company?

29 DP: I got Alpha Company.

30 KC: Alpha Company. And this is what battalion?

31 DP: 1st Battalion, 7th Marines.

1 KC: 1st of the 7th Marines, Alpha Company. You mentioned that the battalion
2 commander said there were troubles in the company. What were the troubles?

3 DP: Well, not many people like to talk about this, but I feel like I should. It was a
4 racial problem in the company and there was a racial problem in the Marine Corps. The
5 Black Power movement had started and some of the black Marines had become very
6 militant. They refused to obey orders in some respects and had real attitude problems.
7 They didn't like to take orders from white officers. They thought that—they echoed a lot
8 of the anti-war rhetoric and it was very unsettling when you saw this face-to-face.

9 I took over the company and one of the first things I noticed was on the side of a
10 latrine, was painted in big, bold letters was, "Black Power" So that was one of the things
11 that I had to deal with.

12 There was one bunker and inside the bunker there were three Marines who
13 refused to come out and they were armed to the teeth. Their buddies would bring them
14 chow from the chow hall and water. Everybody was afraid to go into the bunker to tell
15 them they had to go on patrol just like everybody else. There were more than that in the
16 bunker, but there were three hardcore in there.

17 So, I got there and I'm in my brand new, new-guy utilities and my jungle boots
18 hadn't been scuffed or anything. I decided I just walked through the door one morning
19 when they were still asleep and said, "Hi, I'm your new company commander. I'd just
20 like to talk to you and see what your problems are." They were kind of taken back that
21 I'd just walk in and I didn't carry a weapon in or anything. I sat down on a locker box
22 and said, "Tell me what the problems are." Well, they talked and talked. I looked around
23 inside this bunker and I could see the—I didn't see any gas masks in there so I told them
24 I would—they talked for a couple hours and one guy was very militant. He sounded like
25 H. Rap Brown.

26 KC: What were they saying? What was their justification for the position they
27 took there?

28 DP: Oh, this is a white man's war, it's unjust. There's a disproportionate number
29 of black Americans in this war. There's a disproportionate number of blacks in the
30 infantry. There's a disproportionate number of blacks being killed. That they're not
31 taking care of their neighborhoods back home are not being taken care of. Just basically

1 that. They pointed out some things that were true and one was that they were not allowed
2 to go on R&R to Australia and blacks were not welcome in Australia. My response to
3 that was, "Well, why blame that on the Marine Corps? We didn't have anything to do
4 with that. Neither did the United States." Of course, Dr. King was alive at that time and
5 there were the marches in Selma and so on. So it was a reflection of the problems in the
6 American society as a whole that manifested itself in Vietnam. Also, there was drug use.
7 Marijuana—you could buy it right on Division Hill. There was a village down the hill
8 called "Dog Patch." You could buy drugs there easily. Especially marijuana. Of course,
9 the Vietnamese smoked opium for recreational purposes and had done so for centuries.
10 They were introduced by the Chinese which occupied Vietnam for a thousand years. So,
11 the drugs and the racial problems combined made it very difficult to command.

12 Also, these Marines are armed and dangerous. They could really be intimidating.
13 What I did was I got a hold of the tank platoon commander. We had platoon of tanks
14 attached to the battalion and I told them that what I wanted to do was I wanted him, just
15 at dawn a couple days later, to drive his tanks up in front of that bunker and block the exit
16 to the bunker so no one could get out of the bunker. I cleared this with the battalion
17 commander before I did it. And then through the firing apertures, I tossed tear gas
18 grenades inside the bunker. I trapped these guys inside there and there was a lot of
19 commotion, a lot of shouting and so on, but they didn't even fire a shot. All they wanted
20 to do was get out of the bunker and get out of the tear gas. As I said, I saw that they
21 didn't have any gas masks. So I would let them out of the bunker if they took all their
22 clothes off. They did and they came out of the bunker and we tied the wrists and put a
23 sandbag on their head and put them in the back of a personnel carrier and took them to
24 the brig. I made sure that my company saw all this going on.

25 After I got rid of those guys, at another formation I told them that I'm not afraid
26 to use force to instill discipline in this company. The troops are saying, "Yeah, good."
27 Those guys had not gone on patrol. Those Marines had not participated in the day to day
28 hardship that the rest of the company had. That quelled that problem. I know I could have
29 gotten in trouble and certainly in civil rights and all that if it had been known, but it was a
30 discipline problem that had to be dealt with. They were not hurt. Maybe they're
31 embarrassed and humiliated, but I had to restore good order and discipline and I couldn't

1 take any physical measures against them like throw frag grenade in there. That was my
2 welcome to rifle company commander.

3 KC: Welcome to Company A. All right, now when these individuals were telling
4 you and describing their grievances and what was wrong and why they refused to go on
5 patrol and wouldn't participate, did you have any sort of empathy? Did you make an
6 effort to understand their point of view and try to talk to them about this?

7 DP: Oh, yeah. Yeah, you're being paid to be a Marine and you're getting combat
8 pay, you've got good equipment. That was a complaint that they had. They said that the
9 M-16 rifle was no good. Then that particular models of M-16s had been issued and at the
10 time, there were a lot of problems with it. I'm sure you've heard about all that. That
11 company had suffered casualties because M-16s had jammed on the troops while they
12 were out in the field. That was one of their big bitches. I had not heard that before. I'd
13 seen the SEALs have an Armalite AR-15 which was the predecessor to the M-16. It
14 worked flawlessly, but the Colt model had some real problems.

15 KC: All right, so you got these individuals under control and you take them to the
16 brig. What becomes of them? Were they court martialed?

17 DP: They were court martialed. I lost track of them. All I said was I didn't want
18 them back. I lost track of them after that. I later understood that one of them had gotten in
19 trouble in the brig in pretrial confinement. No, there were other things going on at that
20 point.

21 One was, Da Nang at that time was the second biggest city in South Vietnam. It
22 had a population of 150,000 . It was a very important city. The Vietnamese Army was
23 there, their I Corps Headquarters was there and also their 3rd ARVN Division
24 Headquarters was there as well. There was a presidential election coming up in
25 September and the U.S. government was under a great deal of pressure to make sure that
26 the Vietnamese had polling places secure from Viet Cong interference where the people
27 could go and vote. Especially they wanted people in the countryside wanted to be able to
28 go and vote. So that became a secondary mission for us. Our first mission, of course, was
29 to prevent rocket attacks on Da Nang, but the second was to secure the villages and the
30 polling places and the villages. Especially at the district headquarters where most of them
31 voted that they would be able to vote. At that time, they were going to have the Boy

1 Scouts, the Vietnamese Boy Scouts in the polling places, running the polling places
2 because they were looked upon as being uninvolved with politics and the most honest
3 people you could get to count the vote. So there was a great deal of emphasis on safety of
4 the polling.

5 When Colonel Rowley left and we got a new battalion commander. This battalion
6 commander had not done his homework on Vietnam. He had been in the Korean War,
7 early in the Korean War. He had a mindset that this was the Korean War all over again. I
8 almost fell out of my chair in the battalion briefing when he referred to the MLR which is
9 the main line of resistance. And that was what they called the front line in Korea, the
10 MLR. There was no MLR in Vietnam. Another thing he wanted to do, and he started this
11 right away about a hundred percent awake in the foxholes all night. Well, most of the
12 battalion was deployed on patrol so the only people left on Hill 10 were the cooks and
13 bakers and candlestick makers and the headquarters personnel and the 105 battery and the
14 motor transport headquarters company, guys like that. He wanted them out in the
15 trenches staying awake all night. Within about a week, the battalion was absolutely
16 dragging because nobody was getting any sleep, me included. I finally went to the
17 sergeant major and I said, "This is crazy. The battalion can't operate this way, This is not
18 Korea." He said, "Yeah, I know; I'll tell him." He did and then we got a new XO, a good
19 one. He could see what was wrong. The colonel started to come around and realize that
20 he couldn't fight this battalion and command it with Korean War vintage policies and
21 tactics and so on. We had to go through a learning curve for our new battalion
22 commander. That was painful.

23 KC: Let me take you back to your company as you are taking control of this
24 company. Once you get the, I guess for lack of a better word, the trouble maker or the
25 hardcore taken care of, what was the response of the other African Americans who were
26 in your company?

27 DP: I just treated them as evenhandedly as I could. I relied especially on my black
28 staff NCOs. A couple of them had been former drill instructors who didn't like the
29 troublemakers. Things seemed to go smoothly after that. I did have a couple more
30 problems, but in Vietnam you can't—it was difficult to impose military justice in the way
31 you could do it in the States. In the States, you could bust the guy down a rank. You

1 could fine and take money away from them, you could lock them up in the brig. You
2 could deny them going on liberty and things like that. The attitude of the Marines in
3 Vietnam, the ones who were troublesome were like, "I'm in Vietnam already, what else
4 are you going to do to me? You can't hurt me." Some of the things that I did was cancel
5 their R&R. They're not going to go on R&R. That was an attention getter. Another was
6 money. You could fine them and it turns out they didn't have any money to go to the PX
7 and deny them a PX run. If I locked them up in the brig, I just lost one man out of my
8 company who could be on patrol. So I didn't want to do that. It was really hard to be fair
9 and do what was right. At the same time, get some malcontent to cooperate. These were
10 the minority. There weren't many of them like that, but it just seemed that they had
11 cropped up in this company and it had been persistent and then to the point that it was
12 demoralizing. I really had a morale problem on my hands.

13 Another thing was that the strength of a rifle company was supposed to be 232
14 Marines. At any given time, I had a foxhole of strengths of about a hundred and twenty to
15 a hundred and twenty-five men in my company.

16 KC: Why was it that low?

17 DP: Casualties, sickness, just not enough guys to go around. So I reorganized the
18 company into two platoons and I attached a machinegun to each squad, I built up my
19 squad strength to about fourteen Marines, and I really loaded them down with gas masks,
20 tear gas grenades, and I had also been able to get some M-14 rifles back into the company
21 to replace the M-16s which were jamming. So when I sent a patrol out, my patrols were
22 always very heavily armed and they could take care of themselves if they got into a
23 firefight with the Viet Cong.

24 One of the things I did was made the squad leaders keep track of which way the
25 wind was blowing when they were in the field. Which way the prevailing wind was. They
26 made contact with the Viet Cong, one of the things I wanted them to do was fire rifle
27 grenades with tear gas. Tear gas grenades into the area where they were receiving the
28 fire. To always do this if they were upwind for the Viet Cong. I told them that if they
29 were surrounded or they were ambushed and they thought they would be overrun, to pop
30 tear gas on their own position and put your gas mask on and pop gas in and around your

1 position because they won't penetrate. The North Vietnamese thought that we were going
2 to use poison gas. A lot of times they thought that the tear gas was poisoned.

3 KC: Where were you able to scrounge up these M-14s?

4 DP: From the Air Force.

5 KC: From the Air Force, they had them for some reason. What kind of reaction
6 did your Marines have when you brought those M-14s in?

7 DP: They wanted them. They thought that was great because a lot of them had
8 been trained with the M-14s and had gone through boot camp and on the range with the
9 M-14. I also was able to get some emergency flares, million candle power flares that they
10 used to light up an airfield if the power goes out, the landing lights go out. I was able to
11 get some corrugated tin and we constructed gallows like a pole and put the corrugated tin
12 on the pole and curved it so that it was facing outward. Then suspended the emergency
13 airfield illumination flare inside this galvanized tin and then attached a thermite grenade
14 to the flare and straightened the pin out and ran a piece of communications wire. When
15 you pull the wire, the thermite grenade exploded and ignited the flare. So you had this
16 million caliber power of light being reflected off the tin and going across the wire outside
17 the perimeter. I was very successful with this using it.

18 I was also responsible for a CAP platoon (combined action platoon), for the
19 security of the CAP platoon which was in my area of responsibility. We hung these
20 magnesium flares all around the perimeter of the ca platoon's position. During the Tet
21 Offensive, that CAP was able to hold on despite of repeated North Vietnamese attacks.
22 One of the reasons is, the first attack that came, they were able to light up their perimeter
23 and that was apparently quite a shock to the North Vietnamese. They had never seen
24 anything like that before.

25 KC: That's really interesting. Did you just come across this idea or put together as
26 you were going through?

27 DP: You know, I just thought it up. One of the things I found is, when I first took
28 over the company, that the troops were somewhat reluctant to fire their weapons. And
29 having operating with Ruff Puffs down in Rung Sat, you shoot one round at them and
30 they're going to shoot a thousand back. That's what I told my troops to do. Somebody

1 pops at you, you make sure that they regret it. Ammunition's cheap and a Marine's life is
2 precious. I'd rather you call for a resupply of ammo than call for a medevac.

3 KC: So it sounds to me the way you're putting things together here is a way
4 designed to not just restore discipline, but to bolster morale and I think probably to gain
5 the trust of these guys. Did you get the feeling that's what you were doing here?

6 DP: Yeah, and I've heard from some of them since then and some of them said,
7 "We thought you were a mad man, but now we see that you were really trying to keep us
8 alive and stop rocket attacks on Da Nang."

9 Another thing that I had that I was responsible for was—behind Da Nang is a
10 mountain called Ba Na. When the French were there, that was the summer resort for the
11 wealthy French. Up at the top of the mountain was a hotel called the Grand Hotel De
12 Tourane. Tourane was the French name of Da Nang at the time. There were all these
13 villas abandoned that were up at the top of this mountain. They had water cisterns that
14 they had collected the rainwater during the monsoons. This was a spot for a radio relay
15 team to stay in contact with the recon teams that were working out in Happy Valley.
16 They needed this radio relay spot up on the mountain. So, I had to provide a platoon to go
17 up there and give security to this radio relay team. It was difficult to get up there. You
18 couldn't climb, you had to go up by chopper. There was a little road that went up that's
19 been heavily mined and hadn't been used in years. I got a ride to go up to see my platoon
20 and they were doing a very good job because they were right there. They were
21 surrounded. There was a water point about two hundred feet below a spring where there
22 was freshwater that came out. They had to fight the Viet Cong to get down to the spring
23 to go get their water. Which was almost a weekly firefight to chase the Viet Cong out of
24 there and they would leave booby traps behind and so on. So the Viet Cong needed the
25 freshwater as much as we needed it. The hotel had been destroyed. The only thing that
26 remained was the fireplace. It was a huge fireplace, a stone fireplace that had been in the
27 lobby of the hotel. The radio relay team had ensconced themselves in there for protection,
28 which was fine. But there was a very small landing zone. You could get a CH-46 in there
29 and that was about it. We had to resupply them, of course, but sometimes they would be
30 socked in at the altitude they were and it was hard to get into them. One of the things
31 about that area up there, plus there were thousands of wine bottles strewn around the area

1 that the French had taken up there. I thought that was pretty amusing that here we are
2 with this beautiful view of the bay of Da Nang and out on the Pacific Ocean up there
3 above the clouds sitting. I don't think we could see clear into Laos from up there, but we
4 can see way up into the—I wouldn't call them highlands, but we could see far west
5 toward the Laotian border. It was critical that we protected that radio relay team so that
6 they could stay in contact with the recon teams that were inserted further out.

7 At one point, I got that platoon to patrol a little bit to get them out of that position
8 completely. Sent at least a squad a day to do some patrolling. If you don't patrol, the VC
9 will see that and they will close in closer and closer to your position. I got them to fire
10 the—they had two 60 millimeter mortars up there so I was able to get them an 81
11 millimeter mortar. So you could just fire it with the base fuse with no chargers on it and
12 the round would just go up in the air. You could just see it go up and then it would drop.
13 It would drop right down the side of the mountain and would explode maybe a hundred
14 feet below. I told them to do interdiction fire with the 81 from time to time throughout the
15 night. That would keep the Viet Cong from climbing up the mountainside toward their
16 positions.

17 Had very good luck with that platoon up there. We were finally relieved by
18 another platoon and I was glad to get the troops out of there. Today, that area has been
19 reoccupied and the hotel is being rebuilt and the road is opened and it's a beautiful place
20 up there.

21 At one point, one of the patrols found an aluminum flashlight and inside the
22 flashlight the batteries had been removed and there was a note in there and it was written
23 in French. One of my officers could speak French and read and write French and he
24 translated this note. It was a female nurse, a French girl, who had met their boyfriend for
25 a holiday up there at that hotel and she had taken the flashlight, written the note in there,
26 and she said, "I'm going to cast this into the jungle as if I'm casting it into the sea and I
27 hope that whoever finds this will get in contact with me." We tried to contact her or the
28 lieutenant tried to contact her, but we weren't able to contact her. To see that this had
29 been a French holiday location and yet we were fighting over it and fighting for the water
30 I found, was kind of incongruous.

1 KC: Certainly. Let me ask you this, Colonel. You're a brand new company
2 commander. You're given a troubled company. You are responsible for making sure the
3 elections are carried out safety. When you first get there you've got to patrol out to make
4 sure that your part of the area around Da Nang is not lobbing rockets in on Da Nang. You
5 are responsible for the protection of the ca platoon. You're responsible for the protection
6 and the safety of this radio relay platoon on the top of this mountain. Did you ever stop
7 and say, "Why in the hell do I have all of these other things going on? Why does this
8 happen to Company A?"

9 DP: Yeah, and a minor correction, it was a radio relay team, it was not a platoon.
10 But yeah, and I discussed this with the battalion commander. I said, "We're doing
11 everything except for what an infantry battalion is supposed to do and that's close with
12 and destroy the enemy." He said, "If the rockets hit that airport, the commanding general
13 will relieve me, and I will relieve you." He said, "That is the most important thing we can
14 do is keep the rockets from dropping on the airfields. He said, "That's our mission and
15 we're going to stick to it."

16 What I wanted to do was do away with these constant patrols and just go out
17 deeper into the area. But we never did get permission to do that.

18 One interesting thing that happened, the battalion commander sent me out to Hill
19 22, which was north of Hill 10. I was able to take the company out to Hill 22 and we
20 were across the river from Hill 10. I was the furthest northern company in the battalion.
21 We were at the mouth of Happy Valley. We could also look up into an area called Charlie
22 Ridge. So I was by myself out there with my company and I really enjoyed that.

23 One day, I got a call to go to the division headquarters for a briefing. I did and I
24 showed up there at Division Hill and we went into this secure area to be briefed and there
25 was none other than Hockaday Walker. I don't know if you've heard of him. He was a
26 fanatic reconnaissance officer. He said there was going to be an operation in Happy
27 Valley on the night of such and such and that we should fire no harassing interdiction fire
28 into that area. That's all he would tell us.

29 Well, it turned out that that was one of the few parachute jumps by recon in the
30 Vietnam War. They parachuted into Happy Valley. I was very curious as to what was
31 going on. So I stayed up all that night and searched through the radio frequencies until I

1 was able to find recon, and they had just parachuted in there. Some had been hung up in
2 the trees, some were lost. It was an absolute disaster, an absolute mess. I later talked to
3 one of the survivors of that patrol, Larry Livingston, who retired as a major general. He
4 said that that was the biggest debacle that he had ever been on as long as he had been in
5 recon, and he was a buck-sergeant when he parachuted in there that night.

6 The next day I didn't want to talk about this on the radio so I got in a Jeep and
7 went over Hill 10 and I told the battalion commander what I thought had happened, that it
8 was a parachute mission that had gone wrong. And that he might be hearing about it. Sure
9 enough he did, but I don't know of many people who knew about that mission.

10 KC: Hmm, it seems so strange to thing that someone would try to use parachutes
11 with that sort of effect in Vietnam.

12 DP: Yeah, but Hockaday Walker was bound and determined to have a parachute
13 operation because of recon people in Vietnam. He did and it was a disaster. One of the
14 interesting things—and Larry Livingston told me that they had a corpsman in that outfit,
15 in that recon outfit that had gone to in-country R&R in Saigon. He had met a girl down
16 there who apparently was Viet Cong. She had talked him into deserting. Livingston said
17 that this corpsman was a blonde-headed, blue-eyed beach boy type of guy. He said,
18 “Before the operation, this corpsman really stocked up on medicines. When they were
19 packing out to go on the operation, said that that this corpsman, his pack was jam full of
20 drugs and prescription drugs, medicine and so on.” They jumped in that night and Larry
21 said they never saw that corpsman again. He thinks he went AWOL that night and joined
22 up with the Viet Cong or the NVA out in Happy Valley, but nobody has ever heard of
23 this corpsman again.

24 KC: Is that right?

25 DP: Yeah.

26 KC: Well, that could be very interesting to figure out what the story is.

27 DP: What happened to him, yeah.

28 KC: You talked a moment ago about going on these patrols. Just by the inflection
29 of your voice and what you said, it seemed that you were frustrated by the types of
30 patrols there. Take me out on a typical patrol outside of Da Nang in your TAOR and
31 explain to me how it worked and what were your frustrations?

1 DP: Well, the Viet Cong had buffalo boys, kids tending water buffalo out in the
2 rice paddies around my hill. These kids would count the patrols and they would count the
3 number of men in the patrol and the time it went out. So, if you sent the patrol out while
4 the buffalo boys were still in the fields, right away the patrol is compromised. So you've
5 got to send a patrol out after it's dark so they can't be seen. So, before they go out on
6 patrols, they've got to gain their night vision. That means they can't be exposed to any
7 light. I was in a quandary. It's difficult to move with stealth and silence if you're carrying
8 a lot of equipment. But, if my patrol got into a fight, I wanted them to have a lot of
9 equipment and a lot of ammunition so that they could prevail. So to start with, you'd do
10 what we'd call a jump test. Once you got all your gear on, you'd jump up and down and
11 see if anything rattled or swung or squeaked or whatever. The first thing to do would be
12 get outside the wire. Once you're outside the wire, go to a predetermined position and
13 just lay down, get in a circle, listen, and see what was going on outside the wire. Once
14 you had done that, then we would move to the first ambush position. You'd set in there
15 and it was usually along the trail and wait there for several hours. You couldn't dig in
16 because you'd make noise and compromise where you were. Then a couple hours later
17 you'd move to another ambush position because they were moving at night; we had to
18 move at night, too. When we got to the second position, we'd usually stay there until it
19 was time to come in. I let them come in in the daylight, but what we would do is one
20 patrol would meet another and maybe increase the size of one patrol to fourteen and drop
21 the other patrol down to ten. So it looked like there was a fourteen-man patrol that went
22 out and a ten-man patrol that went out. If the Viet Cong had detected the size of the patrol
23 going out the evening before, they would be confused because the size of the patrol had
24 changed, but there had been no contact.

25 Once we got into position, one of the techniques I taught was that we would take
26 a communication wire and you'd tie a loop to the com wire and he would put his hand
27 through the loop and then each Marine in the ambush position would have his wrist in the
28 loop on the wire and the squad leader could pull the wire and then each of the other
29 members would pull and you could communicate that way silently. Also, it would help
30 them to keep them awake.

1 The radio—if you turn on the radio and it gets this hissing sound, you can hear
2 that very easily at night. So you had to turn the radio way down. I would call a patrol and
3 ask him if they were okay. If they clicked the handset twice, that meant that they were
4 okay. Now, if they saw something, they would call me and click the handset three times.
5 Meaning that they had detected some movement. Four times was contact is imminent.
6 Then, when the ambush was sprung, I could hear it from Hill 22. It was obvious what
7 would happen. At first you would hear the M-16s start and then the 40 millimeter
8 thumper, the grenade gun. The machinegun would kick in and then you'd hear the AK-
9 47s have a very distinctive high popping sound. I could tell from the rate of fire power
10 that my Marines are putting out that they had firepower advantage over who they had
11 engaged.

12 Then, you wanted to stick around 'til the morning to find out what the damage is.
13 I didn't want them to go into the killing zone, just stay right where you are. Often times
14 there would be movement in the killing zone. The NVA would try to come back in and
15 retrieve their dead and wounded. So it was scary, because you're out there with this little
16 unit and I tried to make sure that I had a corpsman with every unit that went out. When
17 you made contact, the firefight was vicious and fast and was over with pretty quick. But
18 we sent hundreds of patrols out and it was very seldom that we made contact, because the
19 Viet Cong knew our patrols were out before they didn't go out. We dominated that area.

20 KC: How long would these patrols typically last?

21 DP: It would be overnight.

22 KC: Just overnight.

23 DP: Now, another thing I would do is—again, this may sound strange, but let's
24 say I'd get an ammunition reply and a truck convoy comes up to Hill 22. I put a squad of
25 Marines inside the back of a truck, a six-by, put a canvas over them. This all has to be
26 orchestrated. This truck goes back on the road to Da Nang and goes back down into this
27 ravine. The driver pretends like he is having engine trouble. He turns the engine off, starts
28 it, guns it, stops, and so on. He stops on a bridge. The Marines get out from under the tarp
29 and go around the side and duck under the bridge and they hide under there. This is
30 maybe four o'clock in the afternoon. Now, I've got a patrol out undetected. Nobody
31 knows, the Viet Cong don't know that there is a patrol hiding underneath the bridge right

1 in their backyard. Now, I want to keep this patrol out for three days and turn them into a
2 defacto raiding and reconnaissance patrol. These were all volunteers that I asked to do
3 this. When it got dark, they would move here again in prearranged positions. This patrol
4 in particular, I liked to go to the bank of a river that flowed through my area of
5 responsibility. This patrol I gave a Starlight scope. We had just gotten these in Vietnam.
6 They worked fairly well. They were heavy and the technology since then has greatly
7 advanced to the point where the Marine can have the equivalent of a Starlight scope
8 mounted on his helmet. It was a rather cumbersome device, but it did work well.
9 Especially when you set it up on the bank of the river to observe the river.

10 I've got this patrol out there and here comes a convoy of sampans down the river
11 and they don't know that that patrol is there. The squad leader opens fire and he just
12 completely destroys this sampan convoy. Well, the water's fairly deep and it's a swift
13 running river and the sampans go down. You've got people in the water and a lot of
14 screaming and yelling, moaning. I'm not going to send my Marines into the water to do a
15 body count. If we can pick up some of the sampans downstream, that's fine. Especially if
16 they've got ammunition or a rocket laying at the bottom of the sampan, but it's a
17 successful ambush, but the division headquarters wants proof of the ambush. They want
18 bodies. That really pissed me off that they wouldn't listen to the report of the squad
19 leader. I would try to keep one of these hidden patrols out for three days. By that time,
20 they start to get tired and if they were in the paddies, you run the risk of immersion foot.
21 Also, they're losing their sharp edge. They want to sleep. I was able to accommodate
22 them and let them sleep in the daytime in some hidden position.

23 Those were the most successful patrols were the ones that got out and the Viet
24 Cong had no way of detecting them. Oh, they did. Let me take that back because Marines
25 make a distinct footprint with the jungle boots. That's another problem. When you're
26 patrolling in a wet terrain, the jungle boot makes a distinctive sole footprint. They can
27 read footprints just as well as we can. I'm sorry if this sounds so negative, but these were
28 some of the realities we faced in trying to do patrolling in the Viet Cong's backyard and
29 prevent rocket attacks on Da Nang.

30 KC: I don't think it sounds negative at all. Like you say, it's just the reality of
31 what you're having to deal with. This is really enthralling stuff here. Now, you talked

1 about how you hoped to go further rather than these small local patrols. You wanted to go
2 out and take it to them. How would you have done that and what sort of reaction did you
3 get from your superiors when you approached them about this?

4 DP: Well, I would have liked to have been inserted by helicopter up in the area
5 known as Charlie Ridge and then slowly patrol back to Da Nang through some areas that
6 I had seen lights at night up at Charlie Ridge. I knew that the VC were up there operating.
7 That would be one way. Another would be simply search and clear of a village. Surround
8 the village and go in. This was the way the Rough Puffs did it is they'd turn every bed
9 over and search every plot and every outhouse there. It's remarkable the kind of stuff
10 they could come up with.

11 And at this time, I had gotten some Kit Carson scouts attached to the company.
12 They gave me the first ones because by then I was pretty fluent in Vietnamese. I got
13 along with the Kit Carsons and they were former Viet Cong. One guy was from the area
14 and over and again he told me where the VC were and he would say, "Let's go, let's go
15 there. I'll show you where they are." I couldn't get permission to do it.

16 KC: Why not?

17 DP: Because I would be taking X number of night ambushes out of the field. It
18 was quite ways up into this one area. Another thing, it was outside the battalion
19 commander's 81-millimeter mortar range. They had a fire control plan set up where they
20 used the 105s. It was all surveyed and laid out and the battalion commander just didn't
21 want anybody to go outside of that range of fire, and I can't blame him in retrospect when
22 I think about it. Yeah, if the recon could go outside the fan of fire of artillery, why can't a
23 rifle company? I just couldn't get permission to do it. By then, to be honest, I was starting
24 to wear out. I was getting tired. You know, up all night and whenever you got patrols out
25 you can't sleep. You can doze a little bit, but it's very exhausting and it's very taxing.
26 Especially when you get casualties from time to time and step on the damn booby trap.
27 You know, there were more Marines—I don't know if this statistic is true, but up in
28 Northern I Corps, up near the DMZ, they didn't have the booby trap problem that we had
29 down near Da Nang. That's the 3rd Marine Division was up there and the 1st Marine
30 Division was down near Da Nang. We had this ubiquitous booby trap problem and the
31 Viet Cong were extremely clever and skillful setting booby-traps with grenades with zero

1 fused delay in them. They were specifically designed and manufactured to be used as
2 booby trap grenades.

3 KC: You mentioned the Kit Carson scout a moment ago. I would think that I
4 would have difficulty believing the conversion of Kit Carson scouts from being Viet
5 Cong to coming along and serving as guides or whatever with an American unit. How did
6 you deal with this? Does that cross your mind at all or just say, "What we've got, we've
7 got to go with it." How do you deal with that?

8 DP: Well, they had come across and it was a death sentence to them when they
9 had done that if the Viet Cong caught them, and It had entered my mind that maybe this
10 guy was a plant, but if I kept him constantly around me and kept him on the hill, he and I
11 were the only ones that would go anywhere. He would go with me. I just didn't see how
12 he could communicate with the Viet Cong. The two that I had were teenagers; they were
13 just kids. I treated them well and I used to go to see the police chief at the district
14 headquarters. The police chief would give me very good information after I drank some
15 tea with him and talked to him. He would be giving me very good intelligence
16 information about VC activity in the district. Better than any information that we were
17 getting from any battalion intelligence officer. Based on that information, I was able to
18 arrange some of my ambush patrols based on what the district chiefs told me.

19 Well, one morning we were going to see the district police chief. I was in the front
20 seat of my Jeep and I had my driver and I had the two Kit Carson scouts in the back of
21 the Jeep with me. There's no top on the Jeep. The Vietnamese villagers are coming and
22 going to the village market or to the market at the district headquarters village. All of a
23 sudden there's rifle fire right next to my right ear. I see a guy standing by the side of the
24 road being stitched by M-16 fire and go down like a rag doll. The fact that this rifle had
25 been fired right by my ear just scared the hell out of me. We stopped the Jeep and one
26 Kit Carson to my right rear had fired the rifle that he had recognized the guy standing by
27 the road as a Viet Cong commander. He killed him right there in front of me and in front
28 of a bunch of villagers.

29 KC: Now, was he armed or was he doing anything threatening?

30 DP: No, he was just there. This Kit Carson scout jumps out of the Jeep and does a
31 war dance. He's saying to me, "Bad man, bad man, very bad man. Bad VC, big VC, big

1 VC.” He was just so jubilant that he had killed this guy. All the villagers are looking just
2 astonished. I said, “Holy shit, what am I going to do now?” I can’t leave this guy by the
3 side of the road and just drive away. So, we put him up on the hood of the Jeep. We
4 drove up to the district headquarters and the police chief came out and said, “This is a
5 cadre guy. They have been looking for him for years.” They took all kinds of pictures of
6 him and laid him out on a piece of corrugated tin in the village marketplace to show that
7 the guy was finally dead.

8 Well, this goes back to, “Did I trust the Kit Carson?” Well, he had just killed one
9 of the major VC operatives in the district in public. How could I not trust this guy?”

10 KC: That pretty much sealed his case, I would guess.

11 DP: Yeah.

12 KC: Huh, that’s fabulous. Here’s an easy one for you, but I do want to get your
13 impressions on this. You’ve worked for a year in the Rung Sat with the Ruff Puffs. What
14 was it like from leading the Ruff Puffs out on these patrols to leading American Marines
15 in these patrols?

16 DP: Well, a gentle correction. Again, I was not leading the Ruff Puffs. I was
17 accompanying them and I was advising their commander, but now I am in a different
18 situation as a commander. I would lead some patrols, but my battalion commander did
19 not want me out in the field. He wanted me back on Hill 22 coordinating all the patrols I
20 had out at night. Usually that would be an average of six to eight patrols would be out
21 every night. It was a coordination mission making sure that the patrols, number one, they
22 were still in contact with me. That was my worst nightmare is to lose contact with a
23 patrol not knowing if they were okay or not. Then, to try to help them when they engaged
24 the enemy, that was another thing I had to do. Then when they came back to the patrol
25 base, back to the hill, I wanted to make sure they got a big breakfast and all the chow that
26 they wanted and hot chocolate, coffee, grilled cheese sandwiches, eggs, anything. The
27 battalion commander gave me a couple of cooks and a small fuel kitchen grill and so on,
28 so that we could have hot chow for the troops when they came back on patrol. In a
29 bunker, a large bunker that was there on that hill, I had a sand table built of our area of
30 responsibility, our patrolling area. It was crude, but effective. Then I would have the
31 patrols, when they came back, each one of them would come in and they would tell me

1 what they saw, what they heard, what they thought was going on in the area. And so if
2 you do this day after day, you'd debrief a patrol and would put matchsticks out there and
3 little pieces of twigs and you would draw the trails and possible ambush sites and so on.
4 You start to get a sand-table idea of what the Viet Cong's activity is in the area.

5 One of the things that came out during the debriefs was that the patrols thought
6 that they were being followed. That, I found, very interesting. The Viet Cong would be
7 bold enough to follow the patrols. So, the next couple of days I wrote out a message and
8 gave it to each patrol leader. I arranged the patrol pattern very precisely. You've got to
9 stay on the exact patrol route that you're going to go out on. When they got about four
10 hours into the patrol, I told them to open up the message that I'd given them and read it.
11 The message said, "Turn around and go back exactly the way you have come." And they
12 did. I didn't have to radio transmit to tell them to do this. And, almost within fifteen
13 minutes, a half hour, forty-five minutes; half of the patrols made contact with the Viet
14 Cong. The Viet Cong were, in fact, following them.

15 KC: Wow, and almost all of these.

16 DP: Yeah, and it was a very busy night and a lot of fighting in the dark.

17 Another thing that the troops told me is they thought that the Viet Cong were
18 going through their trash. A patrol would stop and they would open up C-rations and they
19 would eat and they would throw the cans around and sometimes they would smoke while
20 they were on patrol. They weren't supposed to but they did. They would leave the
21 cigarette butts around. They'd come back to this area where they had eaten and smoked a
22 couple days later and all the cans were gone and the cigarette butts were policed up and
23 knew that the Viet Cong had done this because nobody else was in the area.

24 So, I said, "Okay, I want each patrol to take a case of C-rations and go to a spot
25 that you can come back to and check it out and just have a picnic and throw the rations
26 around, leave some candy behind, leave some cigarettes behind. We'll come back to this
27 area in a couple of days to see if they'd been there." Well, they were, they had come. So
28 we were baiting a trap for them. I could probably be court martialed for this now, but we
29 took out the C-ration boxes and we left the C-ration boxes there, too. I told them to
30 always leave the C-ration boxes there, but to close the box and leave some goodies inside

1 the box. So the Viet Cong would open the box and take the goodies out. They would even
2 take the box away.

3 Then we rigged up a claymore mine inside the C-ration box that was operated by
4 a battery and we rigged together a little device that when the C-ration box was opened,
5 two wires were pulled together and the circuit was completed and the Claymore
6 exploded. This was very dangerous to do this because they were just Marines. They
7 weren't explosive ordinance disposal specialists. They didn't have a lot of experience
8 with dealing with explosives. Really what we did was we booby-trapped the C-ration
9 box. Anyway, they went out and they took a full case of C-rations plus they took the
10 booby trap box, too. They had their picnic and spread all the cans and cigarettes and
11 candy and stuff around and left that box and left the booby trap box, too.

12 Well, at about an hour they left that position they heard an explosion. We had
13 done this with all the patrols that were out. You were only going to get one chance to do
14 this. Then we heard another explosion and then another explosion. To make a long story
15 short, the Viet Cong had walked up on these C-ration boxes and opened them and a
16 claymore had exploded in their face. We found one Viet Cong's chest cavity in a tree
17 about two hundred yards from where the box exploded. We killed—I can't remember
18 how many there were that we killed, but we had the bodies that time, it was easy. We
19 even went out and took some pictures.

20 The battalion commander was just delighted that we had killed all these Viet
21 Cong and he wanted to know I had done that. I just told him basically what I told you and
22 he said, "Oh my god." He said, "Don't ever do that again." He said, "We could be court
23 martialed for that, for booby trapping a food substance and so on." I said, "Well, you
24 want me to kill VC, they don't hesitate to rig booby-traps to wound and kill my Marines.
25 Turnabout's fair play as far as I'm concerned."

26 KC: With these sort of somewhat unorthodox methods that you are implementing
27 here, what kind of affect does that have? What do they think of you? Or what do you
28 think they thought of you?

29 DP: Oh, they thought that was great. They thought that was wonderful. As I told
30 him, "You only get one shot at this, they're never going to open another C-ration box the
31 way they did that one." Yeah, they really liked that.

1 KC: Now, you bring up a good point there. You talked about this one time where
2 you have all of your patrol, security patrols going through this at the same time. You
3 talked about having your patrols turn around and walk back and engage the VC that were
4 following you. What is it like on the company commander up there on Hill 22 with radio
5 contact, what is it like to have to deal with multiple squads, multiple patrols in contact all
6 roughly at the same time? How do you prioritize and how do you handle all that?

7 DP: Well, number one, in scouting and patrolling, by the book you're never
8 supposed to come back the way you came. They will be waiting for you. We never went
9 back the way we came. So for us to change our pattern to come back the way we came,
10 the Viet Cong were completely caught up by surprise for that. The contact whenever the
11 fighting started, I did not get on the radio. I always waited for them to call me. I could
12 pretty much tell by the intensity of the firefight, the sound, that my Marines had the upper
13 hand. They would really pour it on. So as long as I could hear that, I felt pretty sure that
14 they were okay, that they were going to come out okay. Because once you made contact
15 with the Viet Cong, they didn't want any part of my patrols. I don't think they wanted
16 part of any patrol. These patrols were so heavily armed, and the Viet Cong knew this, that
17 they didn't want to tangle with patrols in this particular area. Then if they called me, they
18 usually called because they needed a medevac. That I could do fairly routinely. I could
19 get a medevac out to them.

20 Another thing is, if they needed a medevac, I'd always ask for ammunition
21 resupply, too. The amount of ammo that they had shot up. Sometimes it wasn't necessary
22 because a Marine had stepped on a booby trap and no shots had been fired, but he had
23 been severely wounded and needed a medevac. But it was orchestrating. I could also call
24 in gunships and I did that several times. I never really got to call too many airstrikes in
25 that area because we had artillery and 81 millimeter mortars available. We just didn't
26 have that big of concentration of Viet Cong to warrant an airstrike when it could be taken
27 care of by artillery.

28 KC: When you have multiple patrols in contact at the same time, how do you deal
29 with incoming radio contact? How do you decide, "Okay, this one's got my attention
30 right now, but I know I've got to pay attention to this one in a minute." How do you
31 coordinate all of that? To me it would see like it was chaotic.

1 DP: Oh yeah, it was chaotic. I used to have to tell one squad leader to wait out and
2 I told them—we even practiced how to be as cryptic as possible on the radio to let people
3 know what was going on. We had a code. Varsity meant officer, frozen meant dead. I
4 can't remember all of them, but it was kind of a short-hand for what the problem was. We
5 could very quickly relay information. Pretty much you anticipated what they were going
6 to do. You had to be careful. Sometimes the troops get excited and they'd say, "I need an
7 emergency medevac." Well, emergency medevac means if we can get the guy to the
8 hospital, he's going to live. A routine medevac means he's going to live, but he needs to
9 go to the hospital anyway. We've got to get him, but he's not an emergency. He's not
10 going to go into the operating room immediately. He's going to be put in a wheel chair
11 and taken and he's going to be dealt with when they go through triage there at the
12 hospital.

13 So, gunship support, medevac, and sometimes we couldn't get a medevac. You'd
14 have to carry your wounded back to the hill and we would keep him there until the next
15 morning. That was trying. Yeah, it was trying.

16 That night when we did the reverse patrol direction. That was probably the busiest
17 night that I had when all those patrols were in contact.

18 Then, also, the battalion, they could hear the fighting going on and they're calling
19 me, on my case asking me what's going on. And I would have to really get ugly
20 sometimes and say, "Let us handle the situation. We'll tell you what's going on as soon
21 as we can. We're not going to give you fragmentary information that's going to lead to
22 speculation." Because when you do that, then the battalion commander and an operation
23 officer starts to second guess you, starts to tell you what to do and so on. Sometimes, and
24 I can say this now, I'd turn the radio off to a battalion. I wouldn't talk to them. Laugh
25 about this now, but the battalion operations officer was a guy named Emmett Huff, whose
26 a dear friend of mine, He and I were advisors together in '71, '72 and he was the battalion
27 operations officer. I was a captain and he was a major. He was a real task master and he
28 could be very forceful, especially on the radio. He would run the battalion when the
29 battalion commander said, "I want to do this and Emmett would implement it." You
30 know, they want this instant gratification with a who, what, when, where, why, and how
31 after action report, while an action was still going on.

1 KC: I didn't think about that from that direction. Not only are you getting it from
2 below, but you might be getting it from above as well. That just complicates it.

3 DP: Finally, I'd had it out with Emmett and I said, "I'll call you." I went over to
4 see him and we had it out and he pretty much left me alone after that. He was a very
5 good man and he was a very successful attorney in Houston now and we're still in
6 contact. Being a battalion commander later, I always wanted to know what was going on.
7 When you got troops in contact, TIC, as it's called, you just can't tell them enough. You
8 don't want to send bogus information and sometimes you would. You wouldn't even
9 know it was wrong, but it was. And then you know that this information is going to go up
10 to the commanding general and it's going to go on up to the chain of command because
11 they want to know what's going on, too. The area around Da Nang, you have the division
12 command post up on Division Hill and they can see out into the Rocket Belt where all the
13 patrolling is going on. They can hear the firefights and they can see the flares going off.
14 They know that there's some activity. Of course, the duty officers are going to start
15 calling a regiment and saying, "What's going on in your tactical area of responsibility.
16 We see activity and troops in contact, vicinity of grid coordinates such and such. What's
17 going on out there?"

18 So I saw myself as the bumper between my troops in the field and the chain of
19 command over me. Oh, it's a forge you don't want to be in. You're between the hammer
20 and the anvil. That's a wrong analogy, but you have to protect your troops and look out
21 for their welfare first because that's your job. You know, I got the impression that when
22 there was contact, on up the chain of command, they were always very interested in it, of
23 course, and what's going on. Yeah, it's a pressure situation, but that's what the
24 commanding officer has got to do and put up with.

25 KC: Why don't we stop there for today, Colonel?

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1 **Session [5] of [9]**

2 **Date: 16 November 2010**

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4 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with
5 Colonel Don Price. Today is November 16, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Colonel
6 Price is joining me by telephone from his home in Sierra Vista, Arizona. All right,
7 Colonel, you mentioned a moment ago that you were interested in relaying another part
8 of your experience as a rifle company commander. Could you please pick up the story
9 there?

10 Donald Price: Yes, where our company was located was on the Hill 22, which is
11 north of the Tuy Lon River which runs into Happy Valley, a main avenue of approach
12 into the Da Nang area. The hill was very small. We did not have a landing zone on the
13 hill, but there was a landing zone on an adjacent hill about 150 yards away. At that time,
14 there was a general officer who had an irritating habit of just dropping in on a rifle
15 company in his helicopter and getting off the chopper and cross examining the
16 commanding officer. His aides would go out and look in your ammunition pit and they
17 would go through your trenches and go through your hooches and just in general, an
18 inspection. They didn't come out to help you in any way to see how you were doing to
19 find out what you needed. It was just more in the form of harassment, I thought. He had
20 never come to my location, but my contemporaries, other company commanders, he'd
21 dropped in on them. Sure enough, one day we get radio transmission that he's in bound to
22 our position. I anticipated this visit so I said, "No LZ on our hill proper. We must sweep
23 the LZ on the adjacent hill." And so the chopper orbited over our position.. They had
24 gunship escorts and we went over and purposely tripped a white phosphorous grenade we
25 planted on the landing zone. When the phosphorous grenade goes off, it makes a really
26 big silvery cloud. So we knew that that could be observed from the helicopter. I called the
27 general's chopper again and said, "We've uncovered one booby trap, we need to go and
28 sweep the zone again to make sure there are no other booby traps or mines on the landing
29 zone." He had been orbiting over our position for almost ten minutes at this point. When I
30 told him we were going to have to sweep again because I thought there might be a mine
31 on the landing zone, he said, "Okay, we'll see you again another day." And they left. He

1 never tried to come back to my hill again. You know, it's a hell of a way to treat a senior
2 Marine officer, but I just didn't have time for him and his gophers to give me a hard time,
3 me and my troops, a difficult going over.

4 KC: Did you find that to be a common kind of thing out there? And to use the
5 phrase "chicken shit," but those kinds of behaviors amongst officers where they would,
6 for example, make a surprise inspection and worry about the little things when there are
7 much larger issues to deal with. Did you find that to be the case in Vietnam? Or was it
8 more relaxed?

9 DP: Well, it depended on the senior officers. Some were just absolute
10 grandfathers and really good people, but there was some exceptions and he was one. He
11 would come unhinged if a Marine had an unauthorized mustache, that is, the hair went
12 down below the vermilion of the lip and I didn't even know what the vermilion of a lip
13 was, but it turns out that's where the skin coloration changes on your upper lip below
14 your nose. If it hits the upper lip or there's any hair that extends down below the
15 vermilion of your lip, that's unauthorized. Another thing was haircuts. I understood that
16 and I insisted on haircuts. Of course, everybody wanted long hair and sideburns at that
17 time, but I insisted on buzz cuts in my company.

18 Another thing was modification of uniforms. Some troops, because it was so hot, I
19 think that average temperature in our area was about eighty-three degrees. Some had cut
20 the sleeves off of their jungle jackets or jungle shirts and that was unauthorized. So it was
21 little things like that which would set this guy's hair on fire.

22 KC: What did you think about it?

23 DP: I thought it was petty. If he came on and asked me about my fire support plan
24 and asked me whether or not the artillery was in the right position to support my
25 operation or whether or not I had all the Starlight scopes I needed or if there was anything
26 I needed, I'd certainly let him on the hill because those are the types of things that you
27 can destroy the VC and at the same time take care of your troops, safeguard your troops
28 with fire power. But that wasn't his modus operandi.

29 KC: How did you think your troops viewed you in dealing with the issue of these
30 kind of rules and regulations and the vermilion of the lip hair and those kinds of things?

1 DP: Well, what I would tell them is you joined the Marine Corps to be Marines.
2 You're paid to be Marines, and so be Marines. Not only be a Marine, but be a good
3 citizen, too, and take care of one another. I constantly talked about teamwork and getting
4 back to the States safely. They understood that. Of course, there was a few malcontents
5 and they're in every outfit and had been so since the time of the Roman Legion, I guess.
6 It's best to be a disciplinarian, especially in a combat situation, but you simply have to.
7 You don't have any other choice. Quickly, a unit in combat can turn into a mob, an
8 undisciplined mob that won't do anything if you let it.

9 KC: How would you maintain the order and maintain the discipline within your
10 company? What sort of things would you do? You talked about making sure they were
11 cared for. What sort of things would you do on a daily basis to make sure that your men
12 were doing what they were supposed to, following orders, and had the right kind of
13 attitude?

14 DP: Well, I really put it on the officers and staff NCOs to take care of the troops. I
15 think that was the first thing. And making sure that the troops were fed as well as you can
16 feed them in the field and try to have one hot meal. When they came off patrol, try to
17 have coffee and cocoa and grilled cheese sandwiches, turkey, and beer. Anything we
18 could do to make things better. At the same time, I thought, and I'm convinced of this,
19 that the best way to maintain discipline is keep them in the field. Keep them out on
20 patrol, keep them doing their business. That's tough, especially if you run the risk of
21 getting immersion foot out in the paddies. But once they are out there and they make
22 contact with the enemy, they are really exhilarated. They liked that and they liked being
23 out and getting down and dirty with the Viet Cong. So that was, I think, inspections, too.
24 Inspect them before they go out on patrol and inspect the trench line if they're standing
25 holes and they're doing a perimeter security.

26 We had a lot of trouble with the M-16 rifle so there were a lot of rifle inspections
27 that went on. Also, I set up a mini firing range right adjacent to my hill so that before
28 they went out on patrol they could fire a couple of magazines out of their M-16 to see that
29 the damn thing worked. That would be a confidence builder.

30 The emphasis has to be on discipline on the squad leader level and you've got to
31 show that you will back up your officers and staff NCOs in their decisions. It has to come

1 down the chain of command. The commanding officer cannot be the lone disciplinarian
2 in a unit. It's got to be everybody pulling together to make the team work in harmony.

3 KC: It sounds like you have very good grasp of what it took to be a company
4 commander. The way your carrying out your mission, the way you were dealing with
5 your troops, the way that you are listening to them and trying to provide for them. It
6 sounds like you thoroughly enjoyed your time here leading this rifle company. But before
7 long, of course, you are called back to HQ, I guess, for the battalion to serve as officer.

8 DP: By that time, I had been in country for over a year and a half and I was tired.

9 KC: I was going to ask you if this was something you embraced or something that
10 you did not want to do.

11 DP: Yeah, and it sneaks up on you. I call it accumulated tiredness. You just feel
12 rundown and at times despondent, but just like getting up in the morning or having to
13 stay up all night monitoring your patrols and catnapping in the daytime, being asked
14 constant questions by battalion, trying to write up men for decorations, write in your unit
15 diary, and keep up with the paperwork. I had a very good first sergeant and XO who did
16 that, but still there's the administrative things, the day to day things of the rifle company
17 that you need to stay abreast of. Also, I was always out looking for intelligence
18 information and so as I told you before, I'd go to see the district police chief and talk to
19 him. I would also drop by at the CAP that I was responsible for and I would talk to the
20 village chiefs. It was a full day and there was just so many things you could do to
21 improve your command posture and take care of your unit. The bottom line with Alpha
22 Company 1/7 was while I was a commanding officer, we never had one rocket fired out
23 of our area of responsibility.

24 KC: You had to feel pretty good about that.

25 DP: That was the mission. We kept the Viet Cong off guard, we killed quite a
26 number of them, and we captured a few. The primary mission was to prevent the rocket
27 attack and we never had one fired out of that area and we never captured one in that area
28 and I never had any type of intelligence report that there was a unit maneuvering through
29 my area carrying rockets.

30 The battalion commander was well aware of that and so he said, "You look tired."
31 I said, "I am tired." He said, "You only have about a month and a half to go in-country,

1 I'm going to move you to the battalion S-3 shop and I want you to take a look at the way
2 we're doing the patrolling and our fire support plan and see if it can be improved."

3 KC: Did this appeal to you at that time?

4 DP: Yeah, because looking from a company perspective at the battalion staff, I
5 saw some things that I thought could be done. For example, when you have a TIC, troops
6 in contact, you don't ask any questions. I talked about that earlier. Just leave them alone.
7 Unless they call you and ask them for help, leave the commanding officer alone until he
8 gets everything sorted out.

9 KC: All right, tell me about your time with the S-3.

10 DP: The S-3 Alpha, I worked for a major by the name of Bill Uren, who is still a
11 dear friend of mine. He had been commanding officer of one of the companies in the
12 battalion, Delta Company, and he was a graduate of the Amphibious Warfare School and
13 he was on the selection list for major. When his commission came in for major, of course,
14 the battalion commander moved him up to become the operations officer. In the
15 meantime, Major Emmett Huff was departing so it was a very good transition from
16 Emmett Huff to Bill Uren.

17 I really enjoyed working for Bill Uren. One of the first things that I did was on
18 each rifle company hill, the Sea Bee's had built an observation tower. I came up with a
19 plan that we had two Marines at night on each of these observation towers. They had a
20 two-by-four wooden railing around the top of the tower. I had them pound nails all
21 around the wooden railings and put down the degrees of the compass that each of those
22 nails represented plus a larger piece of wood tacked to the railing signifying north, east,
23 south, and west. This precluded the use of having to try to break out a lensatic compass
24 and use it at night. We were able to get some fluorescent paint and paint all these degrees
25 that were on the rail of the tower. Then we would have what we called "rocket-launch
26 drills." We would have one hill fire a green star cluster and the other three hills would
27 immediately determine the azimuth and a possible range to that green star cluster and
28 radio that information to the battalion operations center where I had a map with nails and
29 string and that nail would be at the location of the company of the tower. We would
30 stretch the strings across the map based on the azimuth and distances that they had given
31 us. We would get an intersection and that would be where that particular star cluster or

1 green flare had appeared. We would practice this at night and we would have a radio
2 operator with—there would be two in the tower. One would take the azimuth at an
3 estimated distance and the other man would be the transmitter right straight into the
4 battalion command post instantly. Not instantly, but very quickly. Then, the real test
5 when we had a rocket launch. Then, they would say, “Rocket launch 189er, 1,300
6 meters.” They would say, “Outpost 1.” And then they would give the azimuth at an
7 estimated distance. And then outpost two, same thing. Outpost three sometimes the
8 Marines would not see the launch. If I could get two of the outposts, if I could get just
9 two to give me an azimuth and an estimated range, I could do an intersection and I knew
10 where that rocket had been launched from. Then we would lay the artillery. I worked it
11 out with the artillery battery that I could give them the grids to fire where that rocket had
12 been launched very quickly, within just a couple of minutes. So, we were able through
13 this very primitive method, we were able to catch the Viet Cong in the rocket launching
14 position. Especially if the artillery fired airbursts into the area. Because as soon as they
15 fired rockets, they were out of there. If you did an area fire with the airbursts, the chances
16 of killing and wounding some of them were pretty good, and we did. So just a minor
17 correction in the fire support coordination system was able to halt some rocket attacks
18 because when we got into the area, the next morning there were more rockets there that
19 were abandoned. Some of them had been hit by the artillery fire. That was one of the
20 methods we used and the battalion commander was greatly appreciative of it and he sent
21 me up to the regimental staff to brief what we were doing and then on up to the division
22 staff to brief what we were doing. Some of the other battalions adopted this method.

23 KC: So was it pretty well received? It sounds like it would have been.

24 DP: It’s difficult to explain verbally without a map and being able to gesture with
25 your hands. I hope that it’s clear to your listeners.

26 KC: Oh sure, sure, I think you’ve done a more than adequate job of explaining
27 that. One of the things I would like to have you explain to me, to listeners who may not
28 be familiar with how this works is the role of the S-3, operations. Granted, you’re an
29 assistant operations officer here. Explain to me how battalion operations takes the
30 information and the will and the interest of higher command, whether it be regiment or

1 higher up, and how does battalion make these operations happen? Explain to me how this
2 transfer of information becomes operations on the ground.

3 DP: Well, the first thing is that the battalion operations officer has to know the
4 mission of the battalion. That should be his primary guidance. And then he would get
5 guidance from the battalion commander as to how the battalion commander wanted to
6 accomplish this mission, the battalion mission. In the case of 1/7 and the Rocket Belt, the
7 battalion's mission was not just a one-sentence mission, it was quite extensive to include
8 the training of Regional and Popular Forces soldiers. I have a document here in front of
9 me and I'm trying to find the mission right now. If you just bear with me a minute. Well,
10 I can't uncover it very quickly, but the first part of the mission, as I recall, was saturation
11 patrolling within the Rocket Belt to prevent rocket attacks on the Da Nang vital area
12 which means the airfield at Da Nang and also the airfield at Marble Mountain. That was
13 the Marine air field at Marble Mountain where mostly our helicopters were located. We
14 also had to be prepared to do operations outside of the Rocket Belt when directed. So
15 basically we were tasked to be a reaction force if things got out of hand in another area.
16 We never did do that while I was the battalion commander .

17 Here it is: "Occupy and defend the assigned TAOR," tactical area of
18 responsibility. "Maintain the saturation level of patrol activity within the TAOR. On
19 order, be prepared to conduct offensive operations outside the TAOR. Interdict and deny
20 the use of waterways and other routes that egress and ingress to the enemy. Provide
21 security for the road net and traffic within the TAOR. Locate, capture, and/or destroy
22 enemy of forces attempting to move material or rockets into the Rocket Belt. Conduct a
23 pacification program in support of the government of Vietnam. Assist in the training of
24 Popular Forces and assist in the Revolutionary Development Program." So, that's quite a
25 plateful.

26 KC: Yeah, it sure sounds like it.

27 DP: Then you have to take into consideration how big the area was and it was
28 about seventy-two square miles, if I recall correctly. We had adjacent battalions to our
29 south and to our north. But we were essentially in the central area of the Rocket Belt.
30 This is a very good question you've asked. So, how do we do all of these things that
31 we're supposed to do?

1 Well, as a battalion operations officer, Emmett Huff put those into a priority and
2 listed them by importance. Of course, he put, "Locate, capture, and destroy enemy forces
3 attempting to move material rockets into the Rocket Belt." Given the logic that if they are
4 not in the Rocket Belt, they're not going to be launched out of the Rocket Belt. He
5 interpreted the mission to mean that if they do start to launch rockets, for the battalion
6 they have the capability to shut down that attack very quickly. All the other things were
7 ancillary to that. That really became the derived combat mission. So the emphasis was on
8 the saturation patrolling within the TAOR. How do you maintain saturation patrolling? Is
9 every squad has a mission left up to the company commander as how to do this, but
10 you've got to get the squads outside the wire and into the bush with their patrol activity to
11 stop the rocket attacks and to show Viet Cong that you're always going to be out there. I
12 don't know if this is a very good answer, but that's basically it. What the battalion
13 operations officer would do would be to keep track of all of these patrols. We had
14 overlays of maps and we would plot where every patrol went every night and where they
15 set up in their primary and secondary ambush positions. So we knew where all the patrols
16 were throughout our tactical area of responsibility. Then as things changed, as the activity
17 of the Viet Cong increased in one area or another and we got some type of intelligence
18 about a planned rocket attack, we would shift the patrol patterns and move them into that
19 area. We also had to be careful that we didn't set up our patrols to the point that they
20 became so routine that the Viet Cong knew where we were going to go and would avoid
21 that area. Or they would try to ambush a patrol moving into that area. So, it was all about
22 patrolling in the Rocket Belt when I was in 1/7.

23 KC: You talked about the intel that you had received. Of course, you would
24 arrange your operations according to the intelligence. Describe for me, if you will, the
25 relationship; personal relationship and/or working relationship among the battalion staff.
26 The S-1 all the way through, What was it like working together with these other
27 individuals and these other opposites? Did you find it to be a good match? Did you find
28 difficulties? Were personalities an issue? What was it like working on battalion staff
29 between different groups?

30 DP: Well, if everybody was doing their job, it was good. It was teamwork.
31 However, let's say the battalion intelligence officer was not doing his job. He was not

1 being aggressive in finding out what he could. Like I told our intelligence officer to go
2 every day to the district chief's headquarters and talk to them about information because I
3 had done that as a company commander and gotten a lot of good information. I talked to
4 him about the debriefing of patrols to get a sense of what was going on. He had a
5 tendency to just read the message traffic involving intelligence that was sent down from
6 the regiment. I had told him to go to see the recon battalion at division and talk to some
7 of the recon guys and ask them what was going on out at Happy Valley because that was
8 the main avenue of approach in our tactical area of responsibility was Happy Valley. The
9 people who knew Happy Valley and were out in Happy Valley was recon.

10 I have here in front of me a report that the battalion commander had to send to the
11 division via the regiment about a monthly activity. Let me see what it says about
12 intelligence. Okay intelligence, "Enemy situation during the period 1 to 30 September,
13 1967. Numerous low-level agent reports indicated that the battalion regimental-size units
14 within the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines TAOR." That is battalion and regimental sized units.
15 "The 368B artillery regiment NVA is reported located in and adjacent to the western
16 sector. Elements of both the 402nd Sapper Battalion, main force and the R20 Battalion are
17 reported operating in the central and northern sectors. The Q16 Company is also believed
18 to have established a base of operations in the north, central portion of the TAOR." That
19 information was gleaned out of intelligence reports from the regimental and division
20 level. So basically what our intelligence officer is doing is telling the chain of command
21 what they already told us. He has not generated any intelligence.

22 Now, in that battalion area, 72 square miles, they are supposed to be two
23 battalions, one regiment, and two companies operating in our TAOR. Well, based on
24 what the patrols are saying, they don't see that. Where are the tracks? Where are the
25 campfires? Have they interfaced with the villagers? Where have they gone into hiding?
26 Where did they dig in? Where did they cross the rivers? All of these questions start to
27 come up. In that regard, it was very frustrating when the intelligence officer had an "in-
28 basket mentality" where he would read the message board and that would be about it.
29 Instead of getting out and trying to find information firsthand.

1 Another thing I told him to do was to organize the Kit Carson scouts in the
2 battalion into intelligence collection teams. They could walk into the villages adjacent to
3 the company firebases and talk to the people and find out what the people had to say.

4 I was disappointed in the quality of intelligence that we got and the amount that
5 we got. I'll never forget one time. This was when I was still a company commander. The
6 intelligence officer stood up in the battalion briefing and said, "There's an unknown
7 number of enemy. They need an unknown number of holes on an unknown hill." I just
8 felt like pistol whipping that guy. Because it's just absolutely useless. Maybe that
9 regiment that he alluded to might have been in hiding up at Happy Valley or up at
10 Elephant Valley or up in the A Shau Valley. It was probably in the area, but it certainly
11 wasn't sitting in our backyard.

12 KC: What do you do when something like this occurs?

13 DP: Well, at first it's very frustrating and then you can see that he is not really in
14 charge of the intelligence gathering apparatus. That is at the division and regimental
15 level. Most of the intelligence that they were getting was radio intelligence from enemy
16 radio transmissions and not from agents. Of course, they did have agents, but not to the
17 number that we needed.

18 KC: I would assume that other people who were at this briefing would pick up on
19 the same thing. It doesn't seem like it was very useful information. Does anyone call
20 them on it?

21 DP: We got a new intelligence officer after that.
22 Now, on the other side of the coin, I will say that we had a Marine major come down
23 from division and briefed us on a probably rocket attack that was going to take place on
24 the Da Nang vital area. It was going to be a coordinated attack from three different
25 directions. The first attack was a diversionary so that the division would shift all its
26 attention into that area. Once firepower assets were committed to that first attack, then the
27 second and third attacks would come in and those would be the most devastating of the
28 attacks. That attack did take place just as this major had predicted. So, in that respect,
29 sometimes the intelligence was dead on, it was accurate and it was good, and it was
30 "actionable." a word I dislike, but it's used a lot in the intelligence community.

31 *Actionable* intelligence.

1 KC: Were there times where you suspected that the intel was not adequate? That
2 it was just flat out not right?

3 DP: Oh, yeah.

4 KC: Expected to move on with your operation planning anyway. How do you deal
5 with that?

6 DP: I just ignored it and we just had to go on and keep operating. Even if the
7 intelligence was true, what would we do different? If they said there would be a sampan
8 convoy coming down the Tuy Lon River between midnight and 0400, that's the type of
9 information that you can act on. Not some general watered down, you really don't know
10 what the hell they're talking about, information. I sound a little bitter here and I know
11 that. Another thing that the intelligence community would do was they would exaggerate
12 the threat to the point where sometimes was scary. In order that if something did happen,
13 they could say, "We told you so."

14 KC: Now, with all of these types of issues, whether it's intelligence or whatever it
15 might be, as an assistant ops officer, what do you think would be the most important
16 characteristic of someone working in the operations at the battalion level?

17 DP: Well, I think situational awareness. To be aware of what's going on. To know
18 where the companies are, to know the company commanders' personalities, to know what
19 the adjacent units are doing. What is the battalion to the south doing? What is the
20 battalion to the north doing? What are the Regional and Popular Forces doing? Is recon
21 out in front of us and where? Are all the artillery batteries laid correctly to support us? Is
22 our communications equipment good that we can talk to the—can we get air support
23 when we need it? Can we get a medevac? All of these things that contribute to firepower,
24 bring your firepower to bear, getting your casualties out, getting prisoners out, getting
25 resupply in. All of these things are coordinated and handled by the S-3 shop. So,
26 situational awareness is really, I'd say, number one.

27 KC: All right, here's another kind of broad question. What did you find to be the
28 most challenging aspect working in the operations shop?

29 DP: Oh, well, one of the things was trying to make sure that the units were where
30 they said they were. Because if you run artillery into that area or you fire mortars into that
31 area or you call gunship strike in that area and you hit troops on the ground that are out of

1 position. They told you they are in one position and the corporal E-4 was just not good of
2 a map reader and they are out of position and you kill some and wound some Marines
3 with so-called friendly fire. That would be the worst thing that could happen. That was
4 my twenty-four-hour-a-day worry.

5 KC: Did that ever happen in your case?

6 DP: Yeah, we had a gunship hose down a squad from a captain called
7 Ripplemyer's company and nobody was hit. It rained bullets on them. I was able to get it
8 turned off right away. They had moved and they had not told anybody and the gunship
9 hosed down the bank of the river and that's where they were. Also, we had mortars fall
10 on a village. That was when I was on a company commander, but I heard the whole thing
11 over the radio. According to our maps, that village was supposedly abandoned, but it
12 turned out there were people living there.

13 KC: What were the repercussions for this? Was there any?

14 DP: No, and that village was in my tactical area of responsibility and I had to run
15 a medevac for the villagers that night. The villagers had taken their wounded and dead to
16 a CAP. The CAP Marines had taken them inside their perimeter so I had to run the
17 medevac under that Combined Action Platoon's position. It was just one of those things
18 that happens in war and it wasn't done purposely. It was tragic, but there was no
19 repercussions afterwards.

20 KC: These kinds of things are almost inevitable, I guess.

21 DP: Yes, yep.

22 KC: If you remember the scene, can you describe the scene when you were at
23 the—first of all, did you go to the village?

24 DP: No, I did not, but I sent a platoon over there. I didn't send a squad because I
25 didn't know what the reaction of the villagers would be.

26 KC: Sure.

27 DP: We were able to get some humanitarian compensation money for them. I
28 think that was about it. Yeah, it was an ugly situation.

29 KC: So there were deaths?

30 DP: Yeah, for the deaths and the woundings.

31 KC: How many dead were there? Do you remember?

1 DP: I don't recall, Doctor, I think three, one was a woman. I remember that, a
2 young woman with a mother which was really bad. But I'd seen that happen in Rung Sat,
3 too, where some woodcutters were out in the Rung Sat in a no-fire zone and they were
4 detected by an aerial observer and called in naval gunfire on them. Then a couple of
5 Army gunship pilots read their map wrong and they thought the bend in one river was
6 another river and they saw two sampans which, if they had read their map correctly, they
7 were saying that they were in a legal area, but they thought they were in the no-fire zone.
8 They were directed by Rung Sat headquarters to engage the sampan and they killed a
9 number of civilians there. As I said, I'd seen it happen before and I wasn't jaded about it.
10 I felt very badly about it because I liked the Vietnamese people. I think back to your
11 original question was, what was the most troubling or challenging? That is, making sure
12 that the friendlies are where the friendlies are supposed to be and the firepower goes
13 where the bad guys are.

14 KC: Well, let me take you back again since you brought it back to operations.
15 Was there one operation that you helped plan as the battalion S-3 that stands out in your
16 mind as being the most significant or the most memorable?

17 DP: Oh, no, not really. Because our battalion never went on a battalion-sized
18 operation. It was all patrolling. However, one night I won't forget is just prior to
19 Christmas of 1967 when one of our patrols heavily engaged an NVA regiment that had
20 penetrated our area and was getting ready to set up rockets and it was a six-man patrol
21 and it was led by a corporal by the name of Larry E. Smedley. This was Delta Company.
22 It was on the night of 20 to 21 December 1967. He had a six-man squad on an ambush
23 site at the mouth of Happy Valley and an estimated hundred Viet Cong North
24 Vietnamese regulars carrying one22millimeter rockets and mortars was moving toward
25 Hill 41. That's where Delta Company was and Bill Uren had been the former
26 commanding officer of Delta Company and he had been on Hill 41. Smedley engaged
27 this large column and took them on and he immediately waited for a reaction force from
28 Delta Company and the Delta Company commander pulled everybody out of the holes
29 on41 and headed down to help Corporal Smedley.

30 Smedley took out a machinegun by himself and gave this NVA regiment a bloody
31 nose and caused them to halt in their tracks and not move any further through our TAOR.

1 He did a one-man assault against the machinegun and he died that night and he was
2 recommended for the Medal of Honor and he got it posthumously. The company
3 commander was a first lieutenant by the name of Michael Neal. He graduated from San
4 Diego State College and he was an attorney, but he didn't want to be a Marine lawyer and
5 he opted to be an infantry officer. He won the Navy Cross that night and he's now a very
6 successful attorney in San Diego.

7 That night, I could just tell something was going to happen. Our Hill 10 where the
8 battalion CP (command post) was, was mortared in order to pin us down. Before the
9 mortar attack commenced, I told one of the radio operators in the combat operation center
10 to go down to the officers' tent, which was down the hill from us, and tell them that I said
11 for everybody to get up and get their helmet and flak jacket on and take cover. This was
12 maybe two o'clock in the morning. He did and they got everybody up down there.

13 When the mortar barrage started, one of the first rounds hit the officers and landed
14 right on top of one of the officer's cots and just blew it completely apart. The guy would
15 have been killed instantly if he had been still in his cot. The whole officers' tent, it was a
16 hard-back tent, it was destroyed. Our mess hall took hits, our radio relay van took hits. It
17 went off the air and couldn't transmit.

18 Chaplain Krulak was our battalion chaplain and he was in the bunker with me and
19 I said, "It sounds like we don't have comm, our radio relay is out. I think the radio relay
20 van has been hit." It's just like a trailer. An aluminum, light weight. Even though we had
21 sandbagged around it, the round hit on top and Chaplain Krulak went to that relay van
22 through a mortar barrage and went inside and he said, "I'm Chaplain Krulak,
23 everything's going to be okay." One Marine said, "Fuck you, Chaplain Krlak, I'm
24 dying." And he did. Krulak administered him last rites and the inside of the radio relay
25 van was a charnel house __ (??) and then Krulak came back into the command and control
26 bunker later and we were still trying to help Corporal Smedley at that time because his
27 squad was cheek by jowl with the North Vietnamese and I smelled something burning. I
28 turned around and looked at the back of Chaplain Krulak's flak jacket and it was
29 smoldering piece of shrapnel embedded in one of the panels of his flak jacket. So, I took
30 out my canteen and poured some water on it and if he hadn't had that flak jacket on that
31 night, he would have been killed. This was Victor H. Krulak, General Krulak's oldest

1 son. That night, blunting that attack on the 22nd on the night of 20-21 December of 1967,
2 that remains in my mind very well.

3 KC: Wow.

4 DP: I wouldn't call that an operation, but I would call it a decisive action of the
5 1/7.

6 KC: Certainly, certainly. Now, this is getting into close to Christmas of 1967.
7 Now, usually when we think of this time we think of a period where the VC and to a
8 different degree, the NVA, are kind of pulling back a little. Setting up stores for a
9 pending attack and in January 1968 of course, the Tet Offensive. It was still busy for your
10 TAOR.

11 DP: Well, we noticed increasing activity during that time and I thought that they
12 were getting ready to do something and that's why I was not surprised when we made
13 contact or when Delta made contact with the NVA regiment that night. What had
14 happened is up in Charlie Ridge, we saw lights up there, moving lights and lots of them.
15 What the NVA do is they have what they call "liberation lamps" that they carry when
16 they're moving at night. We also saw various pistol and signal flares being fired up in
17 Charlie Ridge. The most significant thing I thought—and I didn't hear this myself, but
18 Alpha Company Marines, out in Hill 22 at the close to the mouth of the Happy Valley,
19 heard truck noise in Happy Valley, and they also heard what was either tanks or some
20 type of a caterpillar working at night. Also, thought they heard a lot of wood chopping
21 out in Happy Valley. Also, a number of villagers up and left our TAOR. They picked up
22 and moved. I think they went up into Da Nang into the refugee camps in Da Nang. That
23 was another indicator. Another was there was some young men in the villages who were
24 not members of the RF and PF who left the village. So, take all these indicators in total,
25 plus the increase of radio traffic on the part of the Viet Cong and the NVA. All of those
26 indicators meant to me, that something was going to happen. I didn't know if it was going
27 to be big or little, but it wasn't going to just be the normal activity that we had seen up to
28 that date. All those preparations were precursors to the Tet Offensive.

29 KC: All right, now here you are in December of '67. Let me take you away from
30 the combat operations very quickly and take you into hopefully a better topic at the time,

1 Christmas of '67. Where did you spend Christmas in 1967? What was Christmas like for
2 you in Vietnam?

3 DP: Well, we spent it right there on Hill 10. Because I was an English major in
4 college, the battalion commander, Colonel Davis, put me to work interviewing members
5 of Corporal Smedley's squad to write him up in the Medal of Honor and Lieutenant Neil
6 for the Navy Cross. So I spent a lot of time writing over the Christmas holidays. The
7 Christmas holidays—Christmas Day was observed. We didn't stand down. We were on
8 alert, but the NVA—I don't know if they observed it, but they didn't do anything on that
9 day. There was no activity.

10 Now, afterwards there was another attack on district chief headquarters which was
11 about, oh, five to six hundred yards from Hill 10. We had strung a land line from Hill 10
12 from our combat operations center to the U.S Army advisors at the district headquarters
13 so we could stay in contact with them. Also, there was a CA P on down the road at the
14 _Tuy Loan River bridge there was a Combined Action Platoon. I had never been
15 responsible for it, but when I became the Battalion 3 Alpha, I went and inspected this
16 CAP because it was at a critical location within the battalion's tactical area of
17 responsibility there, a bridge. The CAP Marines had built this bunker to end all bunkers
18 which was their pride and joy. It was this big bunker that they had taken a Conex box and
19 stacked up sandbags around it and turned it into a pretty impressive bunker and then they
20 had their antennas on top of it. I told them, I said, "Don't become stuck in this bunker.
21 You've got to get out and stay in a different position every night so the VC won't know
22 where you are because if they get inside this village, the first place they're going to head
23 toward is this bunker and the second place is the village chief's hooch. So those are two
24 places to avoid at night. You can take your backpack radio and you don't need to talk on
25 the radio from that bunker at night. Get out and get into ambush positions." They ignored
26 me and I had no tactical or command control over the CAP. They belonged to the CAP
27 organization.

28 Well, when the NVA attacked the CAP, that was their diversionary attack. The
29 district chief focused on the attack at the bridge. Meanwhile, the Viet Cong and the NVA
30 combined, had moved into a position to attack the district chief's headquarters once he
31 started sending his reaction force to the CAP position.

1 At this time, I was on the radio and I was talking to a CAP Marine and I asked
2 and I said, “Where are you?” “In the bunker.” I said, “Don’t stay in the bunker.” He said,
3 “I’m under my bunk.” I said, “Do not stay in the bunker; get *out* of the bunker.” Then we
4 lost communication.

5 I went down there the next day and the NVA and the VC had propped up a satchel
6 charge against the bunker and blown it. That was one of the first things that they did and
7 the radio operator was inside the bunker dead.

8 Now, when the CAP was attacked, a couple hours later the main attack came and
9 that was on the district chief’s headquarters. Uniquely enough, the landline between Hill
10 10, our COC, and the advisor’s office was still in tact and I was talking on the landline to
11 the major, Army major who was there. First thing I ask him, I said, “Where is the district
12 chief?” Well, this son of a bitch had a tendency to be in Da Nang at home with his wife
13 whenever the shit hit the fan within our TAOR.” I think that he was Viet Cong.

14 KC: I was going to ask you if you suspected that.

15 DP: I turned to the battalion commander, and he was in the bunker at that time,
16 and I said exactly that. I said, “That son of a bitch is not there. He’s in town.” You know,
17 the commander’s not present on the scene.

18 Well, we had a reaction force up on Hill 10. The cooks, the bakers, the
19 candlestick makers, and the admin guys that were led by a first lieutenant, Mike Janay.
20 We had tanks up on Hill 10, too. So we decided to send the reaction force riding on tanks
21 down this road, oh, a half mile, to the district chief headquarters, district headquarters. I
22 told the tank platoon commander, Lieutenant Tracer, I said, “You are going to be first in
23 line. When you go out the gate, do not go down the road. Turn right and go through the
24 graveyard.” He said, “Well, that’s a sacred site.” I said, “No, it isn’t. They’re going to be
25 in there. On the left side it’s too open. They’re going to be on the right in that graveyard
26 and in that tree line. They’re going to anticipate us in the reaction force.”

27 Well, away they went. By then it’s like three o’clock in the morning. As soon as
28 they get outside the wire, all hell breaks loose. I can hear RPG-7s going off and they said,
29 “We’ve got casualties, we’re coming back.”

1 So, they came back and the lead tank, the driver's head had been blown off and
2 they had to pull him out through the interior of the tank and out through the turret.
3 Everybody was shook up. Major Uren went out and tried to settle everybody down.

4 The battalion commander says, "We've got to go again."

5 At this time I went up and I told Janay, I said, "I told them once, I'm telling you
6 again, don't go down the road. Go into that graveyard and start shooting up all of those
7 elevated graves that you can because they're going to be inside those"—I don't know
8 what you call them, but it's like a little mausoleum or something. Mike said, "Roger
9 that." And they did. In fact, he stopped before they went out of the wire and started
10 hosing down the graveyard with a .50-caliber.

11 Meantime, I'm talking to the major and this guy is absolutely hysterical, but he
12 doesn't talk loud, he's whispering on the landline. He said, "Get me a Spooky. I need a
13 Spooky." That's the flare ship. I said, "I'm trying to get you a Spooky, but there's other
14 engagements in the TAOR. The fighting is general and right now Spooky's not
15 available." I said, "Where are the NVA?" He said, "They're in the next office going
16 through my file drawer." I said, "Where are you?" He said, "I'm underneath my bed."
17 He said, "I don't know if I'm going to make it." I said, "Just hold on."

18 I told Janay also, I said, "Have that tank drive right up on the front porch of that
19 district headquarters, go right upstairs, stick that gun through the front door, and fire it."
20 And that's what they did. I told the major, I said, "Standby because that tank is going to
21 come up your front door and get those people out of there."

22 That's exactly what happened. We stopped that attack that night and the poor
23 advisor, we never saw him again. The district chief was relieved and we got a new district
24 chief. They had to rebuild the district headquarters which was in shambles. There had
25 been sappers that had gotten inside the district headquarters and essentially destroyed it.

26 KC: Wow, that's an awful lot of activity going on around there in late December
27 of '67.

28 DP: Yeah, and they gave us—we got some motorboats. They were just like
29 fishing boats with outboard engines. So the troops, they wanted to play with the
30 motorboats. I told Billy Uren, I said, "They don't know what the hell they're doing.
31 They're not SEAL trained. Those boats are going to lead us to trouble."

1 I had operated out of boats in the Rung Sat and one of the cardinal rules is you
2 don't go down the middle of the river because that makes you vulnerable to ambush from
3 both sides of the river. Either you stick to one bank or the other bank and that cuts your
4 chances of getting ambushed to about, I don't know, maybe fifty percent. Especially if
5 you're drifting in the tide. If you're close enough to one bank and you've got your
6 weapons trained on that bank and somebody opens fire, everybody in the boat can shoot
7 at that until you drift by that area. Or you can crank up your motor and scoot on out of
8 there.

9 The boats were being fired at. So Bill Uren said, "I'm going to go figure out what
10 the problem is." I said, "Well, one of the ways to cure that is to defoliate the banks of the
11 Tuy Loan River with Agent Orange."

12 KC: Going back to your days in the Rung Sat.

13 DP: Yeah, and up in I Corps they called it "Magic Mist."

14 Well, Bill was anxious to get out in the field again so he decided to take some
15 engineers with him and go look at an area that they could possibly defoliate—I told him,
16 "You don't necessarily need to defoliate the area by air. In this instance, because it's not
17 a very big area, you can go in and do it by hand."

18 So away they went in two boats with a squad and the battalion commander
19 decided to go along. So I'm alone on the hill. The battalion XO is there, but I'm in the
20 COC. I'm very concerned about this. The battalion commander and the battalion
21 operations officer out with the squad, plus two engineers.

22 Well, they get to the point and the battalion commander gets out of the boat and
23 here they made another mistake, they landed where you'd want to land. It was a nice
24 clear area where the boat could move up with its prow, bump into the bank, step off the
25 bank, and you can walk down the trail. Instead of going into an area that's hard to get
26 ashore and then hacking your way through the jungle, they went right down the trail.

27 Bill saw the battalion commander walk down the trail and he said, "Don't go
28 there, sir." And he ran in front of him.

29 In the meantime, the troops are trying to get the boats pulled up and secured, the
30 two boats. The squad leader is busy with the boats and Uren drops into a "man trap."
31 Normally they would have punji stakes in it, but this one had a 60-millimeter mortar to

1 go off and Uren fell into this hole and a 60-millimeter mortar went off and severed his
2 leg.

3 The battalion commander sees this, it happens right in front of him, and he loses
4 it. So I get this screaming call from the battalion commander that, “We need a medevac!”
5 I’m just saying, “Where are you? Okay, I’m going to launch the medevac.”

6 In the meantime I said, “Let me talk to somebody else.” So I got the squad leader
7 on the phone and I said, “Get Major Uren back—get a tourniquet on him, get him back in
8 the boat, and get out of there. Go back down the river toward the bridge.” That’s the
9 closest landing zone I can get something into and get him out of there.

10 That’s what I did. I medevac’d him, Bill Uren and his leg was amputated. He was
11 married to a general officer’s daughter. All the battalion commander could say is, “What
12 am I going to tell general so and so why his son-in-law lost his leg. What am I going to
13 tell general so and so?” I was just saying, “Oh man, I don’t need this shit.”

14 Afterward, I got the squad leader and I really didn’t know what happened. I got
15 the information I’m giving you from the squad leader. He was a very experienced squad
16 leader. He was a sergeant. He said, “Sir, I tried to tell him not to land there and not to go
17 down that trail because I was busy with the boats and so on and getting my troops to
18 shore.” Afterwards, he said, “I noticed that there was a Viet Cong marker, a broken limb
19 pointing straight down at the booby trap.” He said, “I would have seen that and we would
20 have found that booby trap in that hole.” That’s the way the Viet Cong would mark their
21 booby traps. With some type of vegetation where it would break in such a way and signal
22 that there was a danger area that there was a booby trap there.

23 Anyway, Uren lost his leg, he became a very successful attorney in San Francisco
24 and now is retired on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.

25 KC: When all this is over, said and done, the medevacs in and the medevacs out.
26 Like you said, you talked to the patrol leader, the sergeant who explained it all to you.
27 What is the atmosphere like at staff, what is the atmosphere like in the battalion in
28 general when something silly like this happens?

29 DP: Well, at the headquarters level it was very demoralizing. I had lost my
30 composure and broke down and cried like a baby. It was terrible. Neither of those field
31 grade officers had any business out there in the field. I had been on R&R before all this

1 had come up. I had been to Australia and I got back the day before this patrol went out.
2 I'm pretty sure I could have convinced Major Uren to change his mind about going along
3 on this patrol. Or I would have volunteered to go, but that's not the way it worked out.

4 KC: Now, you mentioned you went on R&R in Australia. Just kind of drastically
5 switching gears here. Tell me about that R&R. It was '67 in Australia. What was it like
6 for a young captain?

7 DP: Well, the battalion commander ordered me to go on R&R. This was after I
8 had written everybody up or, Smedley up for the Medal of Honor and Mike Neil up for a
9 Navy Cross. By that time, I had just about had it. So the battalion commander told me to
10 go on R&R so I did. On the way down there, I think we were over Borneo, and the
11 stewardess came up and said, "Please secure your seatbelts tightly because we expect
12 turbulence and thunder." This came when we were eating our meal. So sure enough here
13 we go. I'm looking out the window and it looks to me like lightning is striking the wings
14 and all the cutlery and dishes are flying through the air. It was like we were in the middle
15 of a space shuttle. The plane is going up and down, up and down. That was the worst
16 turbulence I had ever been in, in an aircraft.

17 But we made it into Sydney. We got there in the morning and they put us on
18 buses. As we were traveling on buses, I was looking out and I saw some construction
19 men and I was always curious about that because my father and uncle had been in the
20 trades and these men on the construction site were wearing shorts. That was the first time
21 I had ever seen hard hats and blue collared guys wearing shorts on the job. I thought that
22 was kind of funny. But when they saw the buses, these construction guys all started
23 waving at us and giving us thumbs up and so on. I said, "That's great."

24 We went to this hotel and they had a breakfast buffet laid out for us. Anything we
25 wanted to eat from champagne to caviar to lobster and strawberry pancakes. Then they
26 had tables set up that you could sign up for anything you wanted to do. If you wanted to
27 go deep sea diving, if you wanted to go fishing, if you wanted to go archery, camping,
28 whatever. All you had to do is sign your name on this roster and they would arrange
29 everything and it was all free. All I wanted to do was eat breakfast and go to sleep.

30 It was great. The Australian people treated us very kindly and made us feel very,
31 very much welcome. I spent most of the R&R just sleeping and eating and walking

1 around the streets and visiting the pubs. That was about it. It was certainly a change from
2 Hill 10.

3 KC: Was it difficult for you to go back?

4 DP: No, I wanted to get back to see how the battalion was doing. By then, I only
5 had a couple weeks left in country. I was going to go back and pack my bags and say
6 goodbye to 1/7. It was time to get out of there. There was another fairly interesting thing
7 that happened. About this time, the helicopters, I don't think they were Marine choppers,
8 but they could have been CIA. They were equipped with a sniffer. Have you heard of this
9 before?

10 KC: Yeah, the urine sniffer or whatever it was.

11 DP: Yeah, they had one that they would, well, I don't know how it was passed,
12 but it was going to be in support of 1/7. So, they wanted to know where to go. Of course,
13 I sent them right up Happy Valley and then up to Elephant Valley the second time. As
14 soon as they got into Happy Valley they got a lot of hits on this people sniffer. We ran
15 artillery in there. We weren't able to get in there and see if there were any results, but I
16 was pretty impressed by the technology at that time.

17 Also, I could smell the Viet Cong. I think most guys who had been out in the bush
18 a lot, if they were non-smokers, you could tell that you were near the VC. Especially if
19 you got into their camp areas. They smoked this terrible tobacco. It was a local tobacco.
20 They consumed a lot of fish and *nuoc mam* products. Their hygiene was lacking. I'd
21 say that because not in a derogatory way, it's just that they were living out in the field all
22 the time. Individually, if the Vietnamese had soap and water, they're some of the cleanest
23 people you'll run into. They really take care of their hygiene.

24 Out in the bush, I could smell the Viet Cong. I talked to other guys about this,
25 especially SEALs and they'll tell you the same thing. I thought, "Well, if they've got a
26 people sniffer. I don't know what they were sniffing, I think it was the ammonia.

27 KC: Yeah, it seems like it went off most of the ammonia from human waste and
28 urine, things like that. Yeah, a very, very interesting piece of technology. Just a hose,
29 essentially. A high-tech hose hung out of the side of the helicopter. It was pretty bizarre,
30 but pretty cool nonetheless.

1 DP: I never saw the chopper. I only talked to them on the radio and gave them the
2 grids we wanted checked out. I thought that was pretty cool.

3 KC: Yeah, the first time I heard about that I was kind of taken aback. It was very
4 interesting. All right, now you've come back from R&R and of course, you've faced this
5 mess that was this operation battalion commander and of course with the operations
6 officer. I don't think there are any other words to describe it, but a mess which you have
7 come across there. You mentioned that you only had two or three weeks left in country at
8 this point. Did this particular incident help drive the nail in the coffin as it were. Were
9 you ready to get out of Vietnam?

10 DP: Well, the battalion was still successful in stopping a rocket attack that night
11 especially. The battalion commander, despite losing his composure on the Uren patrol
12 was really—he was successful and from there. He moved on up to the [division] staff and
13 I thought he was going to make general, but he never did. Let me see, I left there on
14 January 13, 1968. So I had been there—I was battalion assistant operations officer from
15 December 1 of '67 to January 13 '68; about six weeks.

16 KC: A packed six weeks.

17 DP: Counting less the R&R so maybe five weeks. That was enough.

18 KC: All right, you know that you're getting short. In the middle of January you
19 are going to be going home. Did you have any issues, any trepidation, any regrets about
20 leaving the 1/7 Marines or was it, "Get me the hell out of here, I'm ready to go."

21 DP: Well, sure you're going to miss the battalion and I had been in the battalion
22 before in 1963 as a second lieutenant. The 1/7 was my home. You can't go away from an
23 outfit that you've spent some of the best years of your life in and not have some feelings
24 of remorse and regret, but it was time for me to go. I had been in Vietnam then for, I
25 don't know, eighteen, nineteen months. I was concerned about the battalion because I
26 knew, or I felt, that something bigger was going to happen.

27 Of course, within two weeks of me leaving there, the Tet Offensive started. I was
28 especially concerned about my old company, Alpha, out on Hill 22 at the mouth of the
29 valley, and for the CAP I had been responsible for that was in my TAOR. Sure enough,
30 on the 6th of February, I learned this later, the CAP was in danger of being overrun. So the
31 Alpha Company commander sent a squad from Hill 22 to the CAP. And this squad was

1 ambushed by the NVA on the way to relieve the CAP. There were five Marines killed at
2 this time. It was a sergeant named Ewoldt. He had been a cook in the battalion and he had
3 extended to become an infantryman and he was the best squad leader in Alpha Company.
4 He had been in-country twenty-eight months. He really knew how to take care of himself
5 in the bush. He was killed as well as two lance corporals and a private first class and a
6 private. They were all killed trying to relieve the CAP.

7 I contacted the battalion. I looked for guys who had been there. I tried to find out
8 exactly what happened to them. Mike Janay was still with the battalion when that
9 happened. So we were able to piece together where they had been ambushed. They had
10 just been overwhelmed. They ran into a very big unit and they had fought to the last man
11 and they were all killed, that bothered me. Especially Sergeant Ewoldt's death.

12 KC: I was going to ask you about that. Even though you weren't there, you were
13 not responsible for the company any more, what kind of effect does it have on you once
14 you realized this took place?

15 DP: Well, I was upset that they had been killed, of course. Then, when I studied
16 the map and determined when they had been killed, it was an area that—and I don't like
17 to second guess commanders, but I will at this point. I would not have sent them this way
18 to the CAP. I would have sent them in a roundabout way, but I was told that the company
19 commander said, "Get there as soon as you can and go the shortest way." I often told my
20 troops, "The shortest way and the easiest way is often the most dangerous way." That
21 was true in this case.

22 KC: All right, now you are ready to leave Vietnam in the middle of January
23 you've had it. Describe for me the process in which you left Vietnam there in early 1968.

24 DP: Well, let's see, I knew I was leaving so I went over to the regiment and I said
25 goodbye to the regimental operations officer who I worked with a lot on the radio and I
26 knew. He said, "You've got to say goodbye to the regimental commander." So I went and
27 said goodbye to him, he was a very fine gentleman. I think he was a Navy Cross recipient
28 from the Second World War. I said my goodbyes there and then they sent us up to the
29 division staff for a debriefing and I talked to them up there. They spent about a morning
30 talking to me and getting my views on what had happened. Then I stayed on Division
31 Hill and the next day went down to the Da Nang airfield and had to piss in a bottle.

1 KC: Really?

2 DP: Yeah, had to pass a drug test to get out of there. They had just selected people
3 at random to do that and as a captain, I was really irritated. But they had taken—the way
4 they did it was the last four digits of your—at that time we didn't have a Social Security
5 number, but we had our own service number. It was the last digit of your service number.
6 They rolled the dice and that number would be the number that they would test that day.
7 It was quick and painless and then we waited around in the Da Nang terminal. The same
8 one that I had passed through in 1963. That was five years before. We flew out on World
9 Airways. Flew to Japan and Elmendorf Air Force Base and then into the airbase outside
10 of San Francisco. I can't remember the name of it now.

11 Then I was on home to Flagstaff to see my mother, but I was very concerned
12 about Major Uren so when I got to Flagstaff I stayed there for a couple of days and rested
13 and ate some homemade chow and went out of town and saw some of my friends in
14 Flagstaff and ate some good Mexican food for a change and had a couple of beers.

15 Then I took off back to San Francisco to see Major Uren who had lost his leg. He
16 was in the naval hospital at Oak Knoll. He had been there not a very long time because
17 they had stabilized him at Clark Air Force Base. He had to be stabilized before they
18 moved into Oak Knoll. We almost lost him; he was in bad shape. He just looked like a
19 cadaver to me. He had lost so much weight and blue under the eyes and so on. But he
20 recognized me. He heard my voice and knew it was me. We went in, had a reunion and
21 then I stayed with his family for a couple of days there in San Francisco and I would visit
22 him every day at the hospital. He was very curious as to what was going on with 1/7, as
23 was I, because the Tet Offensive was going on at the time when he at Oak Knoll. I went
24 back to Flagstaff and from there I went onto Quantico and to the Amphibious Warfare
25 School.

26 KC: Let me back up a little bit here. I'd like to get your impressions on a few
27 different things. Having left Vietnam for the first time in quite a while, coming back from
28 Flagstaff, Arizona, first of all. You're back to your hometown. What was it like for you to
29 leave the environment in Vietnam to come back to peacetime United States? What was
30 your reaction, what sort of things did you see? Give me your impression of American
31 society as you saw it when you came back.

1 DP: Well, I would call it reverse culture shock because at that time, oh, they had
2 had the march on the Pentagon, Dr. King was striving for, oh, he was trying to get the
3 movement forward because the blacks felt, and they were, disenfranchised. They were on
4 the margins of society. All the student protests that were going on. I watched television a
5 lot. There was the riots in Detroit. Of course, the music that was coming along.
6 Woodstock hadn't happened as of that time, but Bob Dylan was singing, "Blowing in the
7 Wind." General Hershey had gone on his own to say that students that were in the bottom
8 of their college classes could be drafted by the selected service. There were draft protests.
9 The hippies were having a lot of fun. For the first time that I ever knew, there were drugs
10 in Flagstaff on the campus there at the little college I had gone to. Dr. King, his quest for
11 self-determination for black Americans I thought was great, but the rioting that was
12 taking place. Of course, Bobby Kennedy had thrown his hat in the ring to run. It was
13 questionable what President Johnson was going to do. Incidentally, President Johnson's
14 son, in the wake of the Tet Offensive, took over Alpha 1/7. His son-in-law, he married
15 the daughter—I can't remember the name right now, Chuck...

16 KC: You would have me for that, I know exactly you're talking about.

17 DP: He was the governor of Virginia.

18 KC: Yes, yes, yes.

19 DP: And Benjamin Smock, the doctor, I guess he was a pediatrician was talking
20 about different things. You know, I left there with *The Adventures of Ozzy and Harriet*,
21 and I came home to a completely different world. The debate over Vietnam was fierce.
22 They're trying to find a good candidate; both the Democrats and the Republicans. George
23 McGovern was on TV a lot. McCarthy, I can't remember his first name. He was on
24 television a lot. Many of the debates involved Vietnam. Yeah, it was Eugene McCarthy
25 was his name. So as I said, I came back, the Ozzy and Harriet world and it changed. I saw
26 President Johnson on television and he looked very haggard. I didn't know what was
27 going to happen with him. Of course, later he decided not to run again. One of his sons-
28 in-law had been in Vietnam as a crewman of the C-130, Air Force. It was a turbulent
29 time. Of course, the thing that bothered me the most was that drugs had come to my
30 hometown, marijuana. I had been reminded that marijuana had been in and around
31 Arizona for many years, but had not been on the campus, it was more in the barrios. I

1 watched a lot of Walter Cronkite. I was glued to the television set every night about what
2 was going on during Tet. Especially the fighting in Saigon. I wondered how the Rough
3 Puffs had made out in the Rung Sat. They did okay; they survived. It looked like we were
4 gearing up for a big political fight. That, of course, did take place in Chicago later on at
5 the Democratic convention in August of '68. It was certainly the change of the world.

6 KC: Chuck Rob is the name you were searching for.

7 DP: Chuck Rob, yeah, he met the president's daughter when he was aide in the
8 White House. He was actually stationed at 8th & I Street and I've never met him face to
9 face. Several of my friends knew him when he was at _8th & I and said he was a great
10 guy. He took over Alpha 1/7 and they had to send a report to LBJ about what Chuck Rob
11 had done that day. He got a daily situation report on Captain Rob. Well, the company, I
12 don't know, it might be mean of me to say, but it became the palace guard. They didn't
13 operate very much. And when Chuck was in command of the rifle company for six
14 months, he was moved up to the division staff. One of his duties assigned was to write his
15 own Chuck Rob report for LBJ.

16 KC: What are your feelings on that?

17 DP: Well, this powerful man could get what he wanted and that was not very
18 career enhancing for Captain Rob at that point, that's for sure. The other guys saw what
19 was going on. I wouldn't call it preferential treatment, but it was certainly different in
20 some respects than the way the rest of my peers were treated.

21 KC: Speaking of your peers, Uren is still in the hospital in San Francisco. What
22 was it like for you to go and visit him on a personal level? What was it like to see him in
23 this kind of shape? You're living with his parents there for a brief time in San Francisco.
24 What was that whole scene like for you?

25 DP: Well, it was gut wrenching, but I had to do it and he had suffered wounds in
26 his other leg, too. The surgeons were looking at the possibility of him becoming a double
27 amputee. He was not healing well, either. He looked like hell. He could have been laying
28 at the bottom of a coffin from the way he looked. So I had to leave. I had to get across
29 country and get to Quantico. I had to spend some time with my mom in Flagstaff and I
30 wanted a little R&R, too. I was trying to get away from the war, but Uren pulled through.
31 Of course, his father-in-law was a general officer in the Marine Corps and he asked me to

1 go see his father-in-law when I got to Washington and tell him what happened and I did.
2 It was a crazy time because there's guys in hospitals, there's guys in graves, there's guys
3 in body bags, there's kids smoking dope on the campus. There are parents that are basket
4 cases because they don't know what's going to happen to their kids. There's kids burning
5 draft cards. It's just chaotic.

6 KC: You talked about the Tet Offensive from the prospective of being in the
7 United States. Go into some more detail on that if you will. How do you hear about it,
8 what was it like to hear about the Tet Offensive and what do you remember about it?

9 DP: Well, first I wasn't surprised because of all the things I told you before. I
10 thought something was going to happen. I wasn't surprised, but I was at the ferocity and
11 abrasiveness of the attack. That they would come into our backyard and they would run
12 into a buzz saw. I was astounded that they would go into the suburbs of Saigon and
13 Cholon, the Chinese town. That they would attack the American embassy. That they
14 would be in the front yard of the American embassy. So that not only got my attention,
15 but it got the world's attention. If we're winning, why can the Viet Cong and the NVA
16 launch such an offensive? If we had been winning for three years? The casualties were
17 pouring in. We don't know how many casualties the NVA and the Viet Cong suffered,
18 but if you did some correlation, some rough math with the numbers, it was well into the
19 thousands. I thought that we would prevail eventually. I didn't know how long it would
20 take to wrap them all up, but as I said, they came into our backyard looking for a fight
21 and they got it. After the Viet Cong were broken, you could drive a Jeep from Saigon to
22 Da Nang and not be bothered by local Viet Cong guerillas. A couple of my Vietnamese
23 friends, Vietnamese Marine friends had done that. It was in the months and years after
24 the Tet Offensive because the Viet Cong as an infrastructure was essentially destroyed.

25 I tried to read a lot. I would go to the library and read the *Washington Post*,
26 number one, because I was going to be in the Washington area. Then I would read the
27 *New York Times*. I tried to get a bigger perspective of what was going on then at the
28 company commander level to see what the world reaction would be. It was mixed. Of
29 course, there were Australians in Vietnam at that time. Curious as to what they thought.
30 The Koreans were there. There were a small number of Thais there, Filipinos and so on.
31 Everybody had an oar in the water during that time. They had the German hospital ship.

1 The *Helgoland* was there. It's hard to describe, in retrospect, after all these years to go in
2 through the inner sanctum of emotions to try to feel like what it was like back then. It was
3 some horrible things like the Saigon police chief shooting the Viet Cong in the head with
4 a .38. I later met that guy. What was not said in the press was that that Viet Cong agent
5 had just murdered an ARVN officer and his family in cold blood, and the police chief
6 learned that and summarily shot him. The power of that picture was very profound and
7 still is. It's still an iconic picture of the war.

8 KC: Well, you brought up a very good, very important subject. You talked about
9 the power of the picture. We all know the photo that you are talking about it and Vietnam
10 was a war of photographs that spoke in huge volumes about what was going on, but also
11 what may not have been going on. Like you mentioned, the story behind the photograph
12 and police chief shooting the member of the Viet Cong wasn't known widely. Because it
13 wasn't known widely, people were allowed to draw their own conclusion about not just
14 that, but about other aspects of the war based on what they'd seen in the media. Of
15 course, the media's role in the Vietnam War was very controversial for a lot of different
16 people for a variety of reasons. What was your opinion of the media's coverage of the Tet
17 Offensive? You were someone who was there, you knew what life was like, what the war
18 was like. You're back in the United States, you were watching it on television and
19 reading about it in the newspapers. What was your impression of the way the media was
20 covering the Tet Offensive?

21 DS: Well, my opinion of the press was not very high and it stemmed from one
22 incident. I was medevac'ing a dead Marine and we had a reporter with us and he was on a
23 stretcher and he was covered with a poncho. I told the Marines, "When the chopper lands,
24 don't let that poncho blow off and uncover him." I wanted him out of there with some
25 degree of dignity. Next thing I know, I look over and he's uncovered from the waste up
26 and the reporter's taking a photograph of him. I went over there and started raising hell
27 and who uncovered him. I thought one of my Marines had done that and they said, "Sir,
28 the reporter did it." So I was tempted to pull out my .45 and shoot this bastard right on
29 the spot, but I didn't do that. I told him to get on the helicopter and not come back or I
30 would shoot him. Meantime, we had gotten some rope and we tied the poncho down very
31 securely. I told the crew chief, I said, "This guy's going to try to take a picture of that

1 dead Marine. Don't let him do it." He said, "You got it, sir." So that particular incident,
2 they seemed to want to dwell on the casualties. Especially if villagers were involved and
3 women and children and so on.

4 Overlooked in all this were the atrocities committed by the Viet Cong. The
5 beheadings, cutting off of ears, emasculation, burning. The most atrocious kind of crime
6 you can think of, shoving bamboo slivers up underneath somebody's fingernails and
7 setting them on fire and cutting their throat outright. This is what the Viet Cong would
8 do, but you never saw that in the press. And I saw examples of it. I saw some in the Rung
9 Sat and saw one time up in I Corps what had happened to a Vietnamese soldier who was
10 home on leave and the Viet Cong caught him and desecrated his body after they
11 ;murdered him.

12 KC: What was your opinion of the media as it covered the Tet Offensive in
13 particular in the United States?

14 DP: Well, a lot of the reporters did not get out of Saigon. Although they would
15 write their stories as if they had been in the field. They would bum a ride on the chopper
16 and they would get out and they would talk to a few PFCs and take some pictures. They
17 seldom talked to commanding officers who could give them a larger picture of what was
18 going on. They wanted to get out there, talk to a few people, take a few pictures, and then
19 get on the helicopter, get back to Saigon to have cocktails on the roof of the Rex Hotel.
20 They didn't want to stay overnight and really see what was going on. That was most of
21 the reporters.

22 There were some exceptions and there were some really good ones. There was a
23 little guy named Thompson who worked for CBS and he would stay out. There was a
24 German by the name of Horst _Faas_ (??) who was a photographer. He would stay out
25 and he took some incredible pictures of Vietnam. Then there was a little guy from—I
26 think he's an Australian. Peter Arnett, he was another one. He would stay out with you.
27 There was Dickey Chappell. She would stay out. Incidentally she was killed—she
28 stepped on a booby trap when she was with Bill Key's company. That was very early.

29 So there were some that were great, but for the most part, especially the
30 stringers—some of their reports were clearly fabricated. They'd get their units mixed up,
31 they'd get their weapons mixed up. Some of them didn't even know where the hell they

1 were when they got off the helicopter. There was just a general mistrust of the press. I'm
2 not the only one. A lot of my friends share that view.

3 KC: Colonel, I think we've used up all of our time for today so let's stop there.

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1 **Session [6] of [9]**

2 **Date: 22 November 2010**

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4 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with
5 Colonel Don Price. Today is November 22, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Colonel
6 Price is joining me from his home in Sierra Vista, Arizona. Colonel, we were discussing
7 the Amphibious Warfare School that you attended when you came back in 1968. So let's
8 pick it up there. Tell me what led you to this school. Tell me about the curriculum, tell
9 me about how things worked then in 1968.

10 Donald Price: Well, I was selected to go to the school by monitors at
11 Headquarters Marine Corps. I had not asked to go to the school, but I was delighted to be
12 selected to go. I guess there was about sixty captains in the class and maybe five majors
13 were also foreign officers in the class. Almost all of the Marines had been to Vietnam.
14 Many of them had been company commanders. There I met Andrew DeBona. For the
15 first time he sat right in front of me. I was present at the ceremony when he received his
16 Navy Cross for actions in Mike Company 3/26. Also, John Ripley was there. He and I
17 had crossed paths before and he and I became really good friends at that point. He often
18 had me over to his house to eat dinner with Moline and the children.

19 There was another fellow there from Roxton, Texas. His name was Captain Joel
20 Osmond May Jr. He was from a rural upbringing around livestock and we became fast
21 friends. He was supposed to go to Headquarters Marine Corps, but he didn't want to go
22 because he didn't want to move his family into the Washington, D.C., area because,
23 number one, the schools weren't that good and number two, the cost of housing there was
24 exorbitant. And so I told them that I would take his orders and go to Headquarters Marine
25 Corps instead of him. I was a bachelor, and I could live on the economy in an apartment.
26 Meanwhile, Joel felt so guilty about getting out of those orders in the Marine Corps, he
27 volunteered for his second tour in Vietnam. He was senior to me and he was promoted to
28 major. He was killed in Quang Tri Province on November 14, 1969 by incoming artillery
29 rockets and mortar fire. He was called "Joel Junior" by people who knew him in Texas
30 and he was a great husband and father and someone whom I'll always miss.

1 Another Texan classmate and friend was George Meerdink, Jr. After graduating
2 from the Amphibious Warfare School, he too returned to Vietnam for his second tour. He
3 commanded Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. The famous "Walking Dead."
4 George and five of his Marines were killed by—sound familiar?—incoming artillery,
5 rocket, and mortar fire on a low and away hilltop up near the Laotian border, again, in
6 Quang Tri Province on February 22, 1969. He was a proud family man from Corpus
7 Christi. Many of his classmates from the Amphibious Warfare School and I thought he
8 was destined to wear the stars of the general officer. We lost two of our best after we
9 graduated from the Amphibious Warfare School.

10 KC: Tell me about school itself. How was it arranged? What kind of classes are
11 you going through? The curriculum? What did they focus on? What did your Vietnam
12 experience tell you about this school?

13 DP: Well, they went through all the combat arms on how to employ them. There
14 was a lot of emphasis on lessons learned from Vietnam. There was emphasis on the air-
15 ground team. How it had to work together and that the projection of sea power ashore
16 with emphasis on the fact that we were part of the Naval Service. If there wasn't a Navy
17 we wouldn't have a Marine Corps and we had to work in harmony with the Navy.
18 Missing from that school were Marine aviators because of the commitment to Vietnam.
19 There were very few aviators in the class, which was a shortcoming. I thought we didn't
20 get to interface with those guys. From time to time, we had instructors who had not been
21 to Vietnam. They would teach some very doctrinaire areas and classmates like Paul Van
22 Riper would stand up and say, "That looks good in the textbook, but it doesn't work on
23 the battlefield." There were some very interesting exchanges in that regard.

24 The commanding officer of the school was an aviator colonel by the name of Gus.
25 A very fine man. He took very good care of us. During this time, we were given
26 Wednesday afternoons off to go do academic research. Well, of course, my buddies and I
27 went up to Washington D.C., to an Irish Pub called Matt Kane's. I don't know if you've
28 ever heard of it.

29 KC: I have not, no.

30 DP: It was at 13th and Massachusetts. It was run by an Irishman who had been a
31 submariner during the Second World War who was the fleet boxing champion, Matt

1 Kane. So we would go up there and do our studying in the Irish pub. It so happened we
2 were in the pub when Martin Luther King was killed. A riot took place in Washington
3 D.C., right down near where we were. Matt Kane was a big supporter of the IRA, the
4 Irish Republican Army. The rioters were coming down the street burning the buildings
5 and Matt took us down in the basement into a locked area and broke out some weapons
6 that he had. Thompson submachine guns and carbines and so on. We went up and he
7 opened up the windows and displayed the weapons and stood up on top of Matt Kane's
8 tavern and displayed the weapons. All the rioters took one look at us skin head Marines
9 and they went right on by us. Didn't even bother Matt Kane's place. There was a doctor
10 with us and some of the rioters had been injured and we pulled them off the street and
11 into Matt Kane's tavern and took care of them. We couldn't get out of the area. There
12 was all kinds of firefighting equipment and police and everything is going on. So we had
13 to be in school the next morning and Matt Kane, the kind of guy he is, called Colonel Gus
14 and said that we were temporarily delayed in his place and we wouldn't be in school the
15 next day the next day. Colonel Gus, I guess laughed it off and said okay because the riots
16 were all over the television. That's the way, I guess, you might say we saved Matt Kane's
17 tavern. He was just very lucky that we were there. Of course, as soon as things cooled
18 down, all the weapons went back in the safe down in the basement. I never did ask about
19 them again.

20 KC: What were your feelings about the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr?
21 The riots notwithstanding, what was your opinion of the impact of his death?

22 DP: Well, I was very saddened by it. Despite what the press said, I thought he was
23 a good role model for the black citizens and he was trying to get them enfranchised and
24 helped them move forward. I looked around and I said, "Who's going to be the emergent
25 leader after Dr. King?" I didn't see anybody of his caliber. I was bummed about that.

26 KC: Now, you were talking about the Amphibious Warfare School earlier here.
27 Tell me about the curriculum if you can. In some kind of detail. As much as you can
28 remember. You've talked about others who said, "That's fine, but that's not going to
29 work on the battlefield." What was your opinion? What do you think you could have
30 brought to the discussion?

1 DP: Well, we did have some lessons learned symposiums which were very good,
2 very interesting based on Vietnam. Those were very helpful. One of the major portions of
3 the curriculum was staff planning. How to make the staff work. We studied the history of
4 the staff and the present military staff in the United States military is based on the French
5 staff of World War I. We adopted the French style of staff structure that evolved, of
6 course, but with the G-1 being personnel, G-2 being intelligence, G-3 operations, and G-4
7 logistics and so on. The British have a completely different staff system where the G-2 is
8 probably the most powerful of the staff officers. However, with us the G-3 is, the
9 operations officer. Quite a number of us had been in S-3 and had been in operation shops
10 like I had only for six weeks in 1/7. In my early years, as lieutenant, I had been in the S-3
11 Alpha, the liaison officer. So I had quite a bit of experience in operations planning how to
12 write orders, how to write orders that made sense and gave enough latitude to the
13 subordinate commanders to have some initiative if they saw an opportunity to exploit.
14 We would come up with a plan and the second part of the exercise would be, "Okay, how
15 do you support it?" Both in terms of firepower and in terms of logistics. If you have a
16 regiment of Marines to feed, how many meals a day do they need, how many gallons of
17 water, how much fuel, ammunition, so on. You can come up with a great plan, but unless
18 you can support it logistically, it's not worth the paper it's written on. So that's another
19 thing. It's very revealing to me how logistics really drive almost everything.

20 Also, was the intelligence aspect of it. We didn't have all the things we have
21 today in terms of satellites and sensors and electronic eaves-dropping and so on. We came
22 to the conclusion, at least I did, that we needed more human intelligence than we needed
23 people with linguistic skills. But it was a good school overall. What they were trying to
24 do is groom young captains to become majors who would become staff officers at the
25 regimental and divisional level.

26 KC: Ok, that makes sense. When did you finish your time there?

27 DP: Pardon?

28 KC: When did you finish your time there?

29 DP: In the spring of '69.

30 KC: Spring of '69, all right. When you finish Amphibious Warfare School, what
31 did you want to do? We know where you go, but what was your first choice?

1 DP: Well, I would always say "as directed." I never requested anything. I would
2 just leave it up to the assignment monitor to assign me wherever he wanted to assign me.
3 It made it easy for him to assign someone.

4 At that time, in our class—he actually wasn't in our class, but he was still at the
5 Amphibious Warfare School was a guy named Jack Brennan. They were trying to get an
6 aide for President Nixon. They had sent over the record books of some officers to the
7 White House and they were rejected. Well, Brennan had been sent to a Spanish language
8 school and he was supposed to become an assistant naval attaché in some South
9 American country. Then the government was overturned down there and there was no job
10 for this Marine with Spanish language skills and he was an artillery officer. He and I
11 became friends so the monitors were really kind of upset that the books that they had sent
12 over to the White House had been summarily rejected. So they said, "Okay, we'll send
13 John Brennan's book over there." The next thing we know, he's Nixon's aide and he's
14 stuck with Nixon clear through his resignation and he ended up helping run the Nixon
15 White House out there. He's been portrayed in movies and he's a very successful real
16 estate guy in the Palm Springs area. It was just funny how fate comes down and taps
17 somebody right on the shoulder, right out of the Amphibious Warfare School.

18 KC: What about you, where you go?

19 DP: Well, me too. They needed an aide to the Deputy Commander in Chief in
20 Europe with headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany. A couple of guys' orders had been
21 cancelled for one thing or another so the monitor assigned me to be the aide to the
22 Deputy Commander in Chief, Europe. An Air Force four-star general. Away I went to
23 Stuttgart, Germany.

24 KC: What did you think about this assignment? This is pretty plum stuff.

25 DP: Oh yeah, it was really plum. When I went to work for General Burchinal, first
26 name David, he had been a general officer for thirteen years. Here I walk in, I was a
27 captain and I'm assigned to his staff and I'm in the office right outside his door, his office
28 door. This was a joint command, a joint staff: Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines. The
29 head Navy lieutenant was the junior aide, I was the senior aide, and the Air Force colonel
30 was the executive officer and we had four drivers. He lived in a mansion in downtown
31 Stuttgart that had been the mansion of the military commander of the Baden Wurtenburg

1 District. The Nazi commander had lived there before and right across the fence from the
2 mansion was another mansion that belonged to Dr. Porsche, head of the Porsche
3 Automobile Works. Just around the corner was the Bosch Mansion with Bosch Magneto
4 and spark plugs and so on. So that was the area that he lived in. It was something like a
5 forty-room mansion complete with gardeners, a cabin, a carriage house, stables, a wine
6 cellar and everything. One of my first duties was to survey all of the representational
7 silverware and china, linen and crystal, paintings and so on, that stayed in the house
8 whenever the general officer changed over.

9 The general didn't talk to me. He was gracious and said hello, but he had nothing
10 to do with me. He loved to hunt. He wanted to go hunting up in the Harz Mountains to
11 harvest a red deer. I was directed to set up a hunting trip for him up in the Harz
12 Mountains which is up in the northern part of Germany. Well, it turns out that the general
13 had a train at his disposal. A command train, if you can believe that. It was in the *bahnhof*
14 in the railroad station in downtown Stuttgart. I went down and looked at it and they had a
15 command-and-control car with all kinds of radio equipment. Then there was a working
16 car where you can put together a staff and there was a sleeping car and then a dining car.
17 There was the little rolling stock of four and the engine.

18 I thought, Well, okay. I will put the general aboard his train and he can leave
19 Stuttgart, have dinner aboard the train, sleep on the train, travel up to the Harz
20 Mountains, and then when he gets of the train he will be met by the guides; the forest
21 *meister*. The Germans, they organize their forest. They have a forest *meister*, he's in
22 charge of the forest. They have a *Jägermeister*, he's in charge of the hunters, and then
23 you have the *Jagers* who are hunters. They take care of the game and are very well
24 organized. The head *Jägermeister*, the head hunter, met the general in the morning and I
25 had Jeeps arranged up there to take them into the hunting preserve and so on. He was able
26 to harvest a red deer and then I arranged for a chopper to pick him up and take him to the
27 nearest military airfield. He had two, T-39 Saber Liners at his disposal and they flew him
28 back to Stuttgart. So, there wasn't a flaw in this whole evolution. Had a good meal
29 aboard the train, had breakfast aboard the train invited the *Jägermeister* in, and he just
30 had a great time on this trip and he got what he wanted. I had to get the trophy head
31 stuffed so that it could be mounted on the wall in the mansion. He was just delighted.

1 But before he went on this hunting trip, he had a hunting rifle. He saw that I had
2 an expert rifle marksmanship badge and he didn't have any time. So he told me to take
3 his rifle out to the rifle range and fire it to make sure that it was firing. The sights hadn't
4 been knocked around and it was firing on target. But it turned out he and I apparently
5 took about the same type of sight picture with his rifle. I got the driver and we went out
6 there, a couple of guys, and took some targets with us. We marked the targets first
7 rounds, second rounds. I fired about six rounds with the rifle, a very good rifle, until I
8 was able to adjust it right to the center of the V-ring and I fired off the rest using a
9 sandbag. So it was very easy. I came back and showed the targets to the general and gave
10 him my evaluation of the rifle. He killed this buck with the first round he fired. So that
11 was another feather. He was delighted he had an aide who could fire a rifle like he did.

12 KC: So I'm thinking you're making almost a fast friend out of this general after
13 all of this.

14 DP: Oh yeah, he became a patron and a dear friend of mine. He since deceased.
15 He's buried in Arlington. I've stayed in contact with his wife over the years. He was very
16 good to me. I worked my tail feathers off for him, too.

17 KC: What did you think of this particular service? There you were in the Rung
18 Sat and there you were in I Corps doing all these things and now you're in Germany as an
19 aide to camp general. What did you think about this for your career? What did you think
20 about this personally?

21 DP: Well, I thought it was amazing that a cowboy from Arizona had made a
22 journey like this. Another thing is that the general had tickets to the Stuttgart Ballet. He
23 didn't like to go. So he told me to use the tickets to represent him at the Stuttgart ballet.
24 He had a premiere box seat there. My little German girlfriend and I would go there and
25 we watched the Stuttgart Ballet evolve over two years until it became what the *New York*
26 *Times* billed it as a "ballet miracle" when they came to the United States. We had
27 watched them evolve during that time. Anyway, Nureyev danced, the Russian dancer. I
28 saw Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn and in the *Nutcracker*. No, no, it was *Swan Lake*. So it
29 was just amazing.

30 Another thing we did, he liked to go to the opera. There was an opera house in
31 East Berlin. To prove a point that we had access to East Berlin, we went to Berlin, I went

1 with him. We got in a staff car and went across through the border. This sounds simple to
2 talk about, but it really took a lot of planning and negotiations and so on for General
3 Burchinal and myself to go into East Germany to go to opera. The point is, the U.S.
4 forces had access to the Eastern Zone and General Burchinal was there to prove it.

5 KC: How many people would go with you on a trip like this?

6 DP: He did not like a big entourage. It would just be—normally it would just be
7 one aircraft, a T-39 Saber Liner and there would just be—he would take me and he had a
8 favorite driver and sometimes he'd take a stenographer, a secretary along. Once he got
9 there, there was always an entourage of people to help him with whatever he wanted to
10 do. He didn't like to be fussed over. He was his own man.

11 KC: In your travels in Europe at this time, how did you find the European
12 people's attitude toward the United States? And in particular, the United States'
13 involvement in Vietnam.

14 DP: Well, to be frank, they didn't like us. Stuttgart had been bombed because it
15 had been an industrial town and it still was an industrial town. A Mercedes Benz factory
16 was there, a Porsche factory, Bosch Magneto, and a lot of other industries were there.
17 The British night bombers had really done a job on Stuttgart. The French had occupied
18 and were the first ones into Stuttgart. They had a division of North Africans, Moroccans
19 were the first in. There was a lot of brutality toward the civilians. There was a lot of rape,
20 mutilation, and people of Stuttgart were really mistreated by our allies. Later, the U.S.
21 forces came in, but the damage had been done at that time.

22 Typical example, Oktoberfest. They set up the big tents and they've got the
23 oompah band and they drink beer and sing and all that. Well, it's tough to get a parking
24 space for the Oktoberfest. And the first vehicles that are towed, and usually the only
25 vehicles that are towed are the ones with U.S. license plates. My vehicle was towed, my
26 little Volkswagen was towed because it had U.S. plates. So I told the general about this
27 and he said, "Draft a letter for me to the Lord Mayor of Stuttgart. I want to talk to him
28 about this." I did and we had it translated and he signed it and I sent it. The next thing I
29 know, there's Lord Mayor of Stuttgart with his hat in his hand and he comes to see my
30 general and apologize. He said, "You don't owe me an apology. You owe Captain Price
31 an apology because your people, your police officers, towed his car and he was legally

1 parked.” So, that was an example of we were really not welcome. Our money was
2 welcomed, of course, but they were very cold toward us.

3 KC: Interesting.

4 DP: The general had a reception once a year for all the German heavies and
5 dignitaries in the Stuttgart area. I had to learn all the German names to be at the head of
6 the receiving line to introduce these folks. One of the couple’s names was Graf and
7 Grafine Knuphausen. Don’t ask me to spell it, but Graf is like duke and Grafine is like
8 duchess in German. Graf and Grafine Knuphausen. Well, at that time, the astronauts had
9 just landed on the moon. Grafine Knuphausen says to General Burchinal, “Oh, my dear
10 general, congratulations on your *lunarnauts*.” And we had that name around our office
11 for several weeks after that. The *lunarnauts*. Let me see, they had a dance after the
12 reception and many of the Germans came in full uniform and they had these great big
13 shoulder pads that are made out of gold filigree that hang down. Mrs. Knuphausen is out
14 dancing and they’re swirling around the floor and these German officers are brushing by
15 her and one’s shoulder epaulette catches her wig and pulls her wig off. She sees that and
16 she just laughs and dances around the floor. As the guy comes back, she reaches out and
17 grabs her wig and sticks it on her head, but she sticks it on upside down. You know, there
18 were some moments of hilarity.

19 At one of these receptions, this guy came up to me, a German, he looked at my
20 uniform and he said, “What, you’re not Army, you’re not Navy, what are you?” I said,
21 “I’m in the Marines.” He said, “Oh, yeah, I’ve never fought against the Marines.” He
22 said, “I fought against the Russians and I fought against the Americans.” He said, “I
23 killed many Americans.” And then he opens up his billfold and shows me a picture of
24 himself in uniform. I’m talking to none other than Jochen Peiper of the Malmedy
25 Massacre.

26 KC: Wow.

27 DP: He started telling me war stories about himself and he’s got his picture of
28 himself with his decorations and, not an Iron Cross, but as a Silver Cross with Diamonds
29 and all this. Very highly decorated. Later, I read that he had bought a cabin in a vacation
30 village in Switzerland and somebody—I think they either bombed the house, burned it

1 down, or anyway, they killed him, assassinated him. It finally caught up with him for his
2 war crime trial for his misbehavior during the Second World War.

3 KC: Sounds like this service here, this particular duty that you had in Europe
4 would've been very much a career enhancing move. It sounds like you're meeting the
5 right people. Obviously you're finding a big picture, of sorts, with the general. Did you
6 want to get back to the States? Did you want to get back to the action, so to speak?

7 DP: Another thing before I lead to that is the headquarters of the U.S. European
8 Command had been moved from Camp Saint Cloud outside of Paris to Stuttgart. This is
9 because Charles De Gaulle did not want French forces under the command of a German
10 commander. At that time, one portion of NATO, it was a time for a German commander
11 to be in that NATO structure. De Gaulle did not want the French troops commanded by a
12 German. Basically, De Gaulle pulled out of NATO and told us to get out of France.
13 That's how the headquarters ended up in Stuttgart. I said that a very simple way, but it
14 was much more complicated and politically sophisticated and lots of other things went on
15 that promoted that move. General Burchinal is generally considered the man who moved
16 the headquarters from Camp Saint Cloud, France, to Stuttgart, Germany.

17 Now, the real commander there, the senior commander was General Lemnitzer.
18 He had his hands full with NATO and he stayed up in Brussels. Occasionally he would
19 come down to see General Burchinal or General Burchinal would go up to see him.
20 General Lemnitzer was very concerned about keeping the French in the loop even though
21 they were not really participating partners in NATO. General Lemnitzer saw I had a
22 parachute badge that had gone through parachute school and he said, "How would you
23 like to be my liaison officer to the French Division of Intervention?" And I didn't know
24 what the hell he was talking about, but I said, "Oh, yes, sir." To make a long story short, I
25 ended up going to Pau, France, and going down to French parachute school so that I
26 could be assigned additional duty as the liaison officer to the Division of Intervention that
27 was also Pau. Within the Division of Intervention was a French Foreign Legion parachute
28 regiment. So that was another side adventure.

29 KC: Tell me—you've got to tell me about French parachute school. What was
30 that like?

1 DP: Well, the parachute that they use is smaller than our T-10 and its flatter. It
2 doesn't have the big cup on the top like ours does. It's much more maneuverable and
3 they'd jump from a lower altitude than we do. They jump from a thousand feet. Once
4 your parachute opens, there's only about two or three swings and you're on the ground.
5 They do that so that it keeps the unit integrity. They want as many of the parachutists to
6 land together as possible to keep the squads and platoon and the company together.

7 Their ground school is brutal. The calisthenics that they put them through and
8 they don't have a swing-landing trainer. They just let them slide down a rope into a
9 sandpit to teach them how to land. There were a lot of injuries and there were French
10 soldiers walking around on crutches and so on. So the instructors would make fun of
11 them. They were really tough on their people.

12 One of the most amazing things that I saw was that after we would jump, there
13 would be a refreshment truck pull up and you could drink beer, you could drink wine.
14 They even had these little bottles of brandy that you could drink. Our refreshment truck
15 would pull up. It would have coffee and maybe hot dogs or donuts or something like that.
16 These guys had booze in the morning, right there on the landing zone, unheard of. We
17 would no more do that than fly to the moon. They accepted alcohol into their daily life
18 just as a matter. That was their lifestyle.

19 We went to the French mess, officer's mess at noon and that was a command
20 performance, you had to be there. The commanding officer, they would convene at the
21 bar. Here again, they would have an aperitif before they sat down for lunch. The
22 commanding officer would enter and he would have a drink and they would all go in and
23 sit down at the dining room table family style. The adjutant would stand up and he would
24 read letters to the mess. This was from officers who had been in the mess that had been
25 transferred. Instead of an officer having to write two or three guys like we do, he writes
26 one general letter and it's read to everyone. Then they would talk about who's sick,
27 which wife is expecting a baby, where kids are in school. Just general information about
28 the health and welfare of the mess and acquaintances. Then the chef comes out and he
29 tells the commanding officer what's going to be for lunch. He said, "Well, I've got some
30 fresh asparagus and the ham looked good. The beets didn't look so good in the market,
31 but we do have blah, blah, blah and an assortment of cheeses and the fruit and so on."

1 Everybody claps for the chef because he's very important and then lunch is served. Then
2 during the course of the lunch, the various staff officers talk to each other.. So it's really a
3 working lunch. Then one by one the officers get up and leave and they check out with a
4 commanding officer and he bids them *adieu*, but he's able to keep an eye on everybody
5 and sees how everything is going during this working lunch. Then, they go back to the
6 BOQ room and they take a nap. So they're up again about 1400 and they go back out and
7 put on their jump gear and start training again. The training day doesn't end until about
8 six, six-thirty or something like that. It was really quite a different experience. From Pau,
9 Pau is in the south of France and it's on the Pau River. From there, you can see the
10 Pyrenees.

11 KC: It must have been a beautiful place, I would think.

12 DP: Yeah, it was. There was an Army captain that went with me down there. This
13 big square-jawed blonde headed guy and we had to go into town to get our train tickets
14 back at Stuttgart. We went in uniform. We were in the train station getting the train
15 tickets and there's this old woman and she walked up to him and said to him in French,
16 "Are you the Boche?" She wondered if the Germans had returned to the South of France.

17 KC: Well, those things happen periodically.

18 DP: Yeah, I lived on the economy in Stuttgart and I had an apartment and
19 sometimes I would stop at this neighborhood market in uniform to pick up cheese, milk,
20 butter, and some fresh things. One time I'm in there grabbing a few things and this guy
21 walks up to me and he said, "What are you? You are not Army." I said, "No, I'm not
22 Army." "Well, who are you?" And I said, "I'm with the IDF." He said, "IDF? What is
23 IDF?" I said, "The Israeli Defense Force." The guy says, "*Ach mein Gott! Ein Jude!*"

24 KC: So, how do you respond to this?

25 DP: I just went on my way, but I thought it was really funny to throw that cinch
26 into him.

27 KC: While you were spending your time there with the French, what was their
28 attitude toward the Americans and the American military?

29 DP: You're asking French?

30 KC: Yes, what was their attitude toward the Americans?

1 DP: To be honest, the French in Pau were very friendly toward us. They like us,
2 but at that time there were French forces in Germany, but I didn't have anything to do
3 with them. I was too busy taking care of General Burchinal.

4 KC: If you're finished here on your time in Europe, take me through the process
5 in which you came back to the United States and found your way to your next station.

6 DP: Find my way to where, Kelly?

7 KC: Your next station.

8 DP: Well, I applied for the advanced degree program and at that time, because of
9 the civil unrest and the peace movement and so on, the Marine Corps wanted some of
10 their officers to go to schools where we could find out what was motivating the peace
11 movement and why all the unrest and so on. They sent me to the hot bed, San Francisco
12 State College. The president there was S.I. Hayakawa, who later became a senator from
13 California. So I went from Stuttgart to San Francisco. It is now the University of San
14 Francisco. At that time it was San Francisco State. Now it is San Francisco State
15 University. I picked up a master's degree in psychology at that school.

16 KC: Tell me about San Francisco and San Francisco University in—I believe it's
17 1970, correct?

18 DP: Right, well, it was at the cockpit of the peace movement and civil rights.
19 Some of the things that had happened there, they decided to strike and they went into the
20 library, some of them, and just took the card catalogue and dumped all the cards in the
21 card catalogue on the floor. Which, to me was really stupid because the librarians had to
22 police them all up and put them back in the correct order.

23 KC: Somehow the war was the librarians' fault.

24 DP: Yeah. They saw a military sticker on my car and they vandalized my car.
25 There was lots of graffiti around. It was more like the antics of irresponsible teenagers
26 than it was the hardcore protestors. But there was a lot of role playing with the Indian
27 headbands and tie-dyed shirts and the beads and bangles and the sandals and all that
28 nonsense. So it was difficult for a serious student to get an education at that time. Since I
29 was in the graduate school part of it, I didn't have any difficulty. Just observing them,
30 some of the kids that came on the campus that caused problems weren't even students.
31 Which I thought was just outrageous.

1 At one point, I paid a courtesy call on Dr. Hayakawa to let him know that I was
2 on the campus and I was a student there and that I was sponsored by the Marine Corps,
3 an active duty Marine officer. He was very curious to see me. So I went in and started
4 talking to him. He was a little Japanese man with a mustache and glasses. He had a
5 goatee at that time. I was talking to him and he's talking. Of course, he had written some
6 definitive works about English semantics at one time. I was interested in that and I
7 wanted to talk to him about that. The next thing I know, he goes to sleep. I'm sitting there
8 on the chair in front of his desk and he's sleeping. I said, "Maybe there was something
9 wrong. Maybe he had a heart attack or something." I didn't know what the hell was going
10 on. So I got up and walked out of his office and said to his secretary, "Either he's sick or
11 he's asleep." She says, "Oh, don't worry about it. He does that all that time." He had
12 narcolepsy. I didn't know that. Then later when he became a senator, he would go to
13 sleep in hearings up on Capitol Hill.

14 KC: That would be a little disconcerting, I would think.

15 DP: Yeah, he was the president of the college sleeping when you're talking to
16 him.

17 KC: That's really funny. Tell me about the atmosphere on campus while you were
18 there. You said these things with the card catalogues and the library and that you were a
19 graduate student so you weren't, so much, affected by it, but what kind of atmosphere did
20 you perceive while you were there?

21 DP: Well, there was just tension. There was always a low-level tension there. A
22 lot of it had to do with what was going on in the war. There was a picture of, oh, well My
23 Lai was the big thing then and the investigation and the court martial with Lieutenant
24 Calley and all those things were going on. You could become justifiably upset and
25 outraged about what was going on in Vietnam if you were inclined to. Another thing was
26 that there were a number of Muslims on the campus and there were a number of Jewish
27 kids there, too. They were constantly at each other's throats. They would publish these
28 underground newspapers and some of the editorials in them were just so hate filled they
29 were disgusting to read. There was a lot of, "Let's not have class here; let's go out on the
30 campus and sit under the tree and enjoy the weather and meditate and get in touch with

1 each other's feelings." That kind of crap. You know, it's the touchy-feely stuff. That went
2 on. As I said before, there's no serious learning when that happened.

3 KC: Right. Huh, but again, it wasn't something that affected you. Obviously, you
4 were older, you're in graduate school, etcetera. What was your chosen field of study?
5 Psychology, as I recall.

6 DP: Educational psychology.

7 KC: Why did you choose that?

8 DP: Because that would relate to training in the Marine Corps.

9 KC: Okay, so you'd hope that'd be part of your future is to continue training in
10 the Marine Corps.

11 DP: Yeah, that would help. In my graduate school classes, there were a lot of
12 senior teachers, very experienced teachers. There were a lot of administrators, too. I had
13 some excellent classes there.

14 KC: Did you have to write a master's thesis?

15 DP: Yeah, I wrote it on Marine Corps leadership problems and possibilities in the
16 future. I used the Marine Barracks at Hunters Point as a laboratory for the study of
17 Marine Corps leadership. That thesis has been republished a couple of times. Some
18 people have picked up on it. I haven't looked at it in years, but it was interesting to do.
19 No surprises to me at least, or in my research. I was able to get it done. Yeah, I was in
20 and out of there in a year. Actually, nine months.

21 KC: How was your thesis topic received by the faculty there or people on your
22 committee? In fact, how was you, being a graduate student there as a Vietnam veteran
23 and a current member of the Marine Corps? How were you received?

24 DP: Well, as it turned out, my faculty advisor was a young, Jewish professor and
25 he was fascinated by the fact that I'd just come from Germany. He wanted to talk about
26 Germany a lot of for obvious reasons. He was also fascinated by the fact that the Marine
27 Corps would send somebody to this school. That I had been to Vietnam, I revealed that to
28 him. I wouldn't tell anybody else on the campus, but I had to be truthful with my advisor.
29 He had never been in the military. He confided in me that he wished he'd been a member
30 of the IDF. He still had that in mind to go to Israel and join the IDF. So we got along fine.
31 As a matter of fact, he wrote a letter of appreciation to the Commandant of the Marine

1 Corps after I left the school. He said that he enjoyed working with me and hoped that
2 they'd send more Marines to the school.

3 KC: That must have made you feel pretty good.

4 DP: Yeah.

5 KC: That's really interesting. That's not the kind of response I expected you to
6 give.

7 DP: Well, I thought, "Here I go. If I get a hold of the wrong person, life could be
8 miserable for me here." But I was very lucky.

9 KC: So you finished there in what, 1971, when you finished your master's
10 degree?

11 DP: Yeah.

12 KC: Where do you go next?

13 DP: I went back to Fort Bragg to the Special Warfare Center and I went through
14 the MATA course again, the Military Advisor Training Assistance course in preparation
15 for returning to Vietnam for the third tour.

16 KC: Now, is this something that you'd been harboring for a while? You wanted to
17 go back in again and you wanted to be a part of the advisory effort?

18 DP: Yeah, I volunteered and by this time, I was a major and the assignment
19 officer was a friend of mine and still a friend of mine. His name is Bill Keys. He retired
20 as a lieutenant general and he sent me to this school, the six weeks school at Fort Bragg.
21 I'd gone through there in '65 and they had sure changed their tune about Vietnam at this
22 time.

23 KC: How so?

24 DP: Oh, they saw that a lot of the programs had not worked like the Rural
25 Development Program. It had worked in some areas of Vietnam but not in others. They'd
26 seen that the USAID, U.S Agency for International Development, had poured a lot of
27 resources down a rat hole and the corruption in Vietnam was completely out of hand. The
28 Vietnamese forces had improved and the fighting ability of the forces that had improved.
29 But the war had gone on so long that they saw that the Special Forces had worked well,
30 but not as well as they had counted on back five years earlier. Special Forces units had
31 been overrun or captured Special Forces trained units that were really, some of them were

1 Viet Cong and they turn coats and things like that. Those things that happened. Of course,
2 the specter of My Lai was hanging over the Army. That faculty was not as sanguine as it
3 had been before.

4 KC: Interesting that you say that. Having gone through the MATA course prior to
5 this in the years before, did you find it more difficult, did you find it easier?

6 DP: No, it was very easy and I really studied the language part of it. I could speak
7 quite a bit of Vietnamese, but they put me into an advanced—they gave me a tutor and I
8 was able to become more proficient at Vietnamese.

9 KC: When did you finish your time there at Fort Bragg and when were you going
10 to go back to Vietnam?

11 DP: Uh, I got out of there in, I think, July of '71. Now, at Bragg I met some very
12 important people in my life. One was Robert Sheridan. He retired as a lieutenant colonel.
13 Another one was Walter Boomer, who retired as a four-star as the Assistant Commandant
14 of the Marine Corps. Another guy was Charlie Goode who retired as a colonel. I would
15 serve with them as advisors to the Vietnamese Marine Corps once we got to Vietnam.
16 They were headed to the Marine advisory units like I was.

17 KC: Now, you know that you are bound for Vietnam as an advisor?

18 DP: Yes.

19 KC: Even if you didn't know before MATA, you knew it was going to be the case
20 as a result of that. What about your family, Colonel? What did they think about this?

21 DP: My brother was in the Air Force by then and it was just my mom at home. I
22 went home that August and spent some time with her and just generally prepared to
23 return to Vietnam. I did a lot of jogging and I was practicing Vietnamese and reading as
24 much as I could about the situation in Vietnam. I went to see a number of old friends
25 there in Arizona, but nothing out of the ordinary.

26 KC: That's a good topic to bring up there. You talked about going up to see a few
27 friends. At this point in your life, in your career, like you said you're a major at this point.
28 Did you have the same connection to your hometown? Did you have the same connection
29 to the people that you have grown up with and your connection with your high school
30 friends, etcetera? Or was it different than that?

1 DP: Well, I still had the same connections, but I had changed and they had
2 changed. This is not demeaning, but some of my buddies in Flagstaff, their highlight of
3 the year was to go deer hunting or fishing. There was a lot of hunting and fishing
4 involved. They had families and some of them, I would say, they were stuck in jobs that
5 they didn't like. Some guys were in the timber industry, some guys were working for the
6 railroad. And so when I went to see some of them, all they would want to do is for me to
7 talk about where I had been and what I had done and so on. They seemed to get some
8 kind of vicarious thrill out of that. I'll never forget one guy who had been in the Marine
9 Corps said, "Well, Don, if I had stayed in the Marine Corps, I probably would have been
10 a major today, too. Maybe even a lieutenant colonel." I'm thinking, "Man, it's not that
11 easy. It's not a matter of just hanging around." But, there was, of course, during these
12 visits a lot of recreational drinking went on. Kind of like a reunion of a fraternity, I guess
13 you would say.

14 KC: Did you miss those connections?

15 DP: Did I what?

16 KC: Miss the connections of the relationship? Obviously it seems that you have
17 grown and you've experienced things that they haven't. Perhaps you're saying that they
18 maybe were a little more provincial of a mindset. Did you miss the old relationship?

19 DP: Yeah, they had changed and I had changed and I knew it was never going to
20 be like it was before. I could see that I really didn't have much in common with these
21 guys anymore. Even though we would have been close friends when we were younger, I
22 couldn't talk to them the way I could talk to Walter Boomer, for example.

23 KC: Sure, sure. You know, obviously it stands for reason, I guess. What sort of
24 things do you do as you prepare for your third tour in Vietnam? You're not walking into
25 a cake walk here this time. This is Vietnam, this is the real deal. The Americans are
26 pulling out, but you're going in, you're going to be advising the Vietnamese Marine
27 Corps battalion. How do you prepare yourself mentally for this third time?

28 DP: Well, when I was at the Amphibious Warfare School, there was a Vietnamese
29 officer there, his name was Tri. I had met him in 1963 when I was an on-the-job trainee.
30 So I became his sponsor at the Amphibious Warfare School. I had gotten to know him
31 very well during that time at Quantico. I had taken him into Washington, D.C., on liberty

1 with me and we had gone to the Matt Kane's Irish Pub. I just took him everywhere with
2 me. So I was looking forward to seeing him and some of the other Vietnamese Marines
3 that I knew. The Vietnamese Marine Corps had grown immensely. When I was with
4 them, they had only four battalions and by this time, they had grown to nine battalions.
5 The first time I had been there, they had been a brigade and now they were a full-blown
6 division. I was looking forward to serving with them.

7 I watched a lot of television. Every night I would be glued to the television set to
8 see what would be going on in Vietnam. Then I would go to the local library and I would
9 read everything I could about what was going on over there. The *New York Times* and in
10 L.A., the *Los Angeles Examiner* and so on. So I was really pretty much aware of the
11 situation in-country. Of course, when we were going through the MATA course, we were
12 given weekly briefings on the situation there. I thought some of those briefings were a
13 little bit more rosy checked in comparison to what I was reading in the press. I was
14 anxious to get back and get back into it.

15 KC: Did you have any trepidation about going over for a third tour?

16 DP: Not at all. Because I knew I was going to be with my friends. DeBona was
17 already over there, John Ripley was there, and several other guys that I knew. Ripley and
18 DeBona, I was anxious to see them again.

19 KC: Let's stop there for today, Colonel.
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1 **Session [7] of [9]**

2 **Date: 29 November 2010**

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4 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with
5 Colonel Donald Price. Today is November 29, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and the
6 colonel is joining me from his home again in Sierra Vista, Arizona. Colonel Price, you
7 were talking off the record a moment ago about a development in the Cold War, a very
8 significant development in the Cold War while you were there in Europe. Can you tell me
9 about that? What was it you had to add about that?

10 Donald Price: I was working for General Burchinal, as I said earlier. He was the
11 Deputy Commander in Chief in Europe. I happened to be in a briefing in the back of the
12 room when the SA-7 Stella was discussed. It is also called the Grail, and it's a heat-
13 seeking missile. It's a shoulder launched. It only weighs about maybe three pounds and it
14 enabled the small infantry unit to be able to have a very lethal anti-aircraft weapon on the
15 battlefield and it's heat seeking. It goes after the exhaust of the jet engine. It can go over
16 Mach-1. I think it's got a speed of Mach-1.3 and it can go up in altitude of 3,200 meters.
17 Although, it has made hits at higher altitudes. It's very similar to our Red Eye Missile.
18 Anyway, when I saw this briefing, I saw that the Warsaw Pact had gotten this SA-7
19 Stella or Grail, whatever you want to call it. I said, "If they ever get that missile in South
20 Vietnam, it's going to change the way close air support is conducted on that battlefield
21 almost overnight." The way the aircraft finally came up with a way to avoid it. That was
22 by dropping flares and climb toward the sun in desperation to get away from this heat-
23 seeking missile. As I said, I saw it. I didn't say anything to anybody, but I took mental
24 note and said that that is going to be a show-stopper for close air support.

25 KC: Now, having been to Vietnam on a couple of different tours, was it that
26 you're were not in the position to say anything in this briefing about the effect this could
27 have?

28 DP No, it was just that I was a horse holder in the back of the room. I didn't say
29 anything. I did comment to General Burchinal after the meeting very informally, my
30 thoughts about what it would do with close air support on the battlefield. He just said,

1 “Well, let’s just hope that they don’t get it.” Of course, during the ’72 offensive they did
2 have it. I can talk about that in a little bit.

3 KC: The prior conversation that we had, we had you on your way to Vietnam for
4 your third tour as an advisor. Where do you come into Vietnam and to which Vietnamese
5 Marine battalion will you be assigned or attached?

6 DP: I came in with Walter Boomer, Emmett Huff, who had been in the 1st
7 Battalion, 7th Marines when I was a member of that battalion back in 1967. Charlie
8 Goode, Jim Joy, I believe, and a couple other guys, they all came in at the same time into
9 Vietnam in mid-September 1971. The senior advisor was Colonel Joshua Dorsey. He saw
10 that I had been in Vietnam before and he said, “Well, I want to send you to the 5th
11 Vietnamese Marine Battalion, The Black Dragons.” They had had an advisor there who
12 had caused some problems and at that point in time, they didn’t have an advisor. So I
13 said, “Okay, fine.”

14 And at this time, I met Captain Rich Higgins, William Richard Higgins. He would
15 be later captured by the terrorists in Lebanon and murdered, but that would be a couple of
16 years later. Rich Higgins and I became pretty good friends at that time. He was going to
17 buy a new Harley Davidson motorcycle when he got back to the States. He talked about
18 that a lot. He ended up as a senior Marine aide to Secretary of Defense, Caspar
19 Weinberger in the early 1980s. All of us thought if Rich’s career had continued, he would
20 eventually be a general officer.

21 But that set aside, that does give you some indication about the quality of Marines
22 that were assigned to the advisory command at that time. The criteria was that you had to
23 have a successful previous combat tour and you had to have some decorations from that
24 tour and that they wanted somebody who had been down and dirty. So we had a lot of
25 good guys in that advisory unit at that time.

26 I was assigned to the 5th Battalion and I was sent immediately to the field up in
27 the DMZ area. That fall, not much happened and we were rotated around through
28 Leatherneck Square at the various firebases like Mai Loc, Con Thien, Dong Ha, Ai Tu.
29 Old Army firebases like Nancy, Pedro and old Marine firebases like Holcomb and Sarge.

30 I was sent to Mai Loc initially. I relieved John Ripley. He had been a temporary
31 advisor there. He later destroyed the bridge at Dong Ha. I had known him at the

1 Amphibious Warfare School. He was a good friend of mine. From Mai Loc, we were
2 helicopter lifted up to the Sarge, which overlooks the Ba Long River Valley and Route 9.

3 While I was up on Sarge, there was an intelligence gathering team up there with
4 radio relay team. They were Americans, of course, and Spec 5 Gary Westcott was there
5 and Spec 4 Bruce Crosby. To sharpen my Vietnamese language skills, I spent a lot of
6 time in their bunker listening to the North Vietnamese jabber mostly in numeric codes.
7 Since we were the only Americans on the firebase, we became friends and ate C-rations
8 and played cards together many times. There was really nothing going on at that point.
9 They had a ship's binocular up there that was integrated with a laser range finder. You
10 could look through the ship's binoculars and press the button and a laser would go out
11 and hit the point and it would give you the exact azimuth and range from on top of
12 Firebase Sarge to any target that you wanted to acquire.

13 There was nothing going on. I would get up on the scope in the evening and
14 watch the sunset on the Ba Long River Valley and I would see tigers come down and
15 drink out of the river. I saw that a couple of times. I also saw elephants down in the
16 valley. There was no one down there, it was just completely deserted.

17 We came off of, oh, Sarge. We came down from Sarge and Major Walter Boomer
18 relieved me up on Sarge. There was an outlying hill called Nui Ba Ho which means "Hill
19 of Three Tigers." That's where my assistant was, David Jassem, Captain. Dave Jassem
20 was relieved by Ray Smith up on Nui Ba Ho.

21 Oh, we went back down to—I think we were sent down to, oh, Con Thien. We
22 were there on Con Thien—I was on Con Thien and then there was another little base
23 south of Con Thien and that's where Jassem was located. We were up there during a
24 Thanksgiving. We were getting artillery fire from north of the DMZ. I didn't know what
25 it was. Finally, one of the Marine advisors had been an artillery instructor at Fort Sill,
26 Oklahoma. He had been an instructor in the gunnery department there. He had brought
27 with him a field manual that had pictures of all the rotating rings off of all of the Soviet-
28 built and Chinese-built artillery pieces.

29 Well, we took an incoming round one day and there's a very primitive way you
30 can determine the direction the artillery's coming in. That's called a shell report. All you
31 do is take a stick and lay it down in the shell hole, long access. You look at the spread of

1 the dirt as it kicked out towards the rear of the shell crater. You can shoot an azimuth on
2 that stick that you've laid across the shell crater. Then you ask somebody from an
3 adjacent fire base to do the same thing and then you take those two azimuths and you do
4 a resection and you can determine where that gun was.

5 Well, this gun was from over twenty-five thousand meters away when we did the
6 resection on the map. I sent the Vietnamese out to collect parts of the artillery round and
7 they came back with a piece of the rotating ring. We took that and laid it up against the
8 picture—we would alter this artillery book and we finally found—it's like the fingerprint
9 of an artillery round. We finally found a picture of the rotating ring that was identical to
10 the piece of shrapnel that we had picked up. It turned out it was a 130-millimeter field
11 gun. Nobody had ever seen this before in South Vietnam. It outranged all of the guns in
12 South Vietnam except for the 175-millimeter gun. There was always all kinds of trouble
13 with the 175-millimeter gun. It would fire once and break down. But, the 130-millimeter
14 Soviet field gun outranged our howitzers and far outranged our 105 howitzer. So we
15 knew that they had this new gun on the field which was really a wakeup call. They were
16 firing this gun intermittently for harassing and interdiction fire. From north of the DMZ,
17 they were firing at Con Thien. Con Thien means "Hill of the Angels."

18 Well, on Thanksgiving Day I get this call that says, "There's inbound to see
19 you." I said, "Negative, we don't need anybody up here. All they're going to do is attract
20 artillery fire." They came back negative. "He's inbound. You have no choice." I said,
21 "Well, tell them once they land to take off, don't sit on the LZ and wait, get off the LZ."
22 Anyway, here they come and it looks like an armada of helicopters, gunships. And
23 overhead there's a forward air controller and there's jets on station orbiting with bombs. I
24 said, "What the hell is going on?" So this chopper comes up, a brand new Huey, a big
25 one, the HU-1D model, lands. This little admiral jumps off. There's a bunch of horse
26 holders with him, Navy captains. There's one Marine colonel who's behind him and the
27 admiral shakes my hand and this colonel behind him, Marine colonel, is mouthing,
28 "CINCPAC, CINCPAC ." I finally understood who the guy was, who the admiral was.
29 Then he mouthed, "McCain, McCain." Then I realized this was the CINCPAC Admiral
30 Cain, Admiral McCain, the father of John McCain who was a POW.

31 KC: Yeah, that's as big a fish as you're going to find.

1 DP: What's that?

2 KC: I said, "That's a big fish as you're going to find out there."

3 DP: Oh, yeah, and I motioned to the chopper, "Get out, get out of here." So they
4 took off and Admiral McCain, the first thing he does is lights a cigar. He looks around
5 and he said, "Where are we?" I said, "You're on Con Thien, sir." And he said, "I
6 understand that you're the furthest northern American in South Vietnam." And I said,
7 "No sir, that's not correct. Over on Ai Tu to the east at Gio Linh, there's an Air Naval
8 Gunfire Liaison ANGLICO team over there." He said, "Well, I was told otherwise." He
9 looks at this colonel. This poor colonel looks gut shot. He said, "Well, never mind." He
10 said, "I want to see North Vietnam." I said, "Well, sir, the only way you can see it is
11 we've got to climb up the tower and you're only going to be able to see the tree line on
12 the north bank of the Bien Hai River." He said, "Okay, let's go." So he and I climb up in
13 the tower. We look over there and I've just got a little set of binoculars. I carried
14 binoculars, real small ones that I bought because the Marine Corps-issued ones are so big.
15 He looked through the binoculars and he said, "Is there anything you need?" I said, "Yes
16 sir, I'd like to have a pair of ship's binoculars to be mounted on this tower so I can see
17 better and acquire targets out to my front." He said, "Okay, we'll do that." We climb
18 down out of the tower and he turns to one of his gopher Navy captains and says, "I want
19 Major Price to have a pair of ship's binoculars up here that we can mount up on that
20 tower so we can see what the hell's going on out there to the front." He says, "Is there
21 anything else you need?" I said, "No sir, but it's Thanksgiving. I'd like to get some
22 turkey." He says, "Well, I can't help you with that one, but I'll go see those Marines at
23 ANGLICO, those ANGLICO Marines over there way over to the west or to the east." So
24 he gets on his—they call the chopper back in and artillery fire is starting to come in and I
25 can tell that some of these senior officers, they were scared and they were anxious to get
26 out of there. So the chopper came in and picked them up and they were gone. But they
27 didn't go over to Ai Tu. I guess they had second thoughts. They didn't go over to Gio
28 Linh.

29 Then about a week later, this Army colonel comes up there to Gio Linh and he
30 wants to know, "What is this thing that you want, a ship's binocular?" He had no idea
31 what Admiral McCain had said. I explained it to him that this is the type of very large

1 binoculars that are mounted on the ship that they can see across and acquire other ships
2 on the high seas and so on. Anyway, they did finally get a set of ship's binoculars. They
3 brought them up and mounted them in the tower and I was able to use them. The Easter
4 Offensive started. Con Thien was one of the first fire bases to fall. I guess those
5 binoculars ended up in a museum belonging to the NVA. I don't know where they are
6 now. That was my visit from Admiral McCain.

7 KC: That is really kind of bizarre, all things considered. Let me take you back to
8 coming into the south. You're going to be with the 5th Vietnamese Marines. What was
9 your impression of this unit when you got there?

10 DP: Well, I had known the battalion commander by reputation and his name was
11 Lich. He had been a tiger when he was a first lieutenant and a captain. There had been
12 other guys who had served with him as an advisor. When Lich got married and he had a
13 couple kids and he changed. He wasn't aggressive at all. I had been told by advisors to be
14 careful of Lich because he would bug out; he would leave you and don't trust him. He'll
15 look out for his own skin before he will look out for his troops. I was very leery of Major
16 Lich.

17 They had the battalion executive officer was a very large man for Vietnamese. He
18 was at least six feet tall with, oh, a hundred and seventy pounds. He was kind of anti-
19 American, but he was very brave. His name was Ba, Tran Ba. I looked to him to be more
20 of the combat leader of the battalion than to Major Lich. Although, Major Lich was
21 senior to Major Ba.

22 I looked around at all of the company commanders and they had some very good
23 senior staff NCOs who had been around the Vietnamese Marine Corps for a long time. So
24 it was a good unit, the 5th Battalion called Hoc Long, which means "Black Dragons."
25 Where we were supposed to be, we were right up on the DMZ, right across the Ben Hai
26 River from the North Vietnamese.

27 The battalion had—one of the things I paid a lot of attention to is how they
28 employed their 81-millimeter mortars and whether or not they could use them and did
29 you use them. They were good, they had a very good 81 crew, which I was happy about. I
30 surreptitiously looked at the weapons and they were clean and I looked at the M-60
31 machineguns. They were well armed and well-equipped. They had plenty of hand

1 grenades and Claymores and everything they needed to fight with. It was a good
2 battalion.

3 KC: You mentioned that Ba was not particularly crazy about Americans by the
4 sounds of it. I've heard this from other advisors. What do you suspect was his source of
5 friction with the Americans?

6 DP: I think that when he went through the second lieutenant school at Quantico,
7 some of the second lieutenants had made fun of him. One story I heard is it was snowing
8 at Quantico and the lieutenants were training in the field and he was inside of an amtrak
9 and he got sick and threw up. The American lieutenants never let him forget that. It could
10 have happened to anybody.

11 KC: Now, was the 5th Battalion at this time basically split in two? Executive
12 officer and commander?

13 DP: The Alpha-Bravo group?

14 KC: Yes.

15 DP: No, the whole battalion was on Con Thien.

16 KC: Okay, the way you were explaining it, it sounded like there was a little bit
17 different set up there.

18 DP: Well, there was one company that was down south where Jassem was, but
19 both the majors were on Con Thien together. But yeah, that was the way they used to run
20 things with the Alpha-Bravo group. There was four companies in the battalion. The
21 senior advisor would be with the battalion commander with two companies and then the
22 junior advisor would be with the battalion executive advisor with the other two
23 companies. Now, what they would do, and this is what got them in trouble. Sometimes
24 when they're trying to make contact, the two columns would move separate from each
25 other, and the battalion command group, their bodyguards, would drift back and forth
26 between the Alpha and Bravo units. If the Alpha made contact then the battalion
27 commander would go toward the Alpha group. As Bravo made contact, then the battalion
28 command group would go towards the Bravo and take over there. And that was how
29 earlier, one of the advisors had been killed and the entire command group had been wiped
30 out. I wasn't there, but that was what happened to Tom Kennedy in 1966, Tom Kennedy

1 was killed. That was because of this Alpha-Bravo Concept. That was because of this
2 Alpha-Bravo concept.

3 KC: So, when did that change? Do you have any idea?

4 DP: It never did change. They continued to operate that way.

5 KC: Interesting. Now, you mentioned prior to this that there had been some
6 difficulties with this advisor assigned to the 5th Vietnamese Marines. What was the
7 source of that problem?

8 DP: Well, this advisor, who shall remain nameless, he just didn't like the
9 Vietnamese. He didn't like their food; he didn't like their hygiene. He was unhappy in the
10 field. He was sick a lot, that was one of the things. He had diarrhea and backed himself
11 out of the field and he ended up down in Saigon. Major Lich had said "good riddance.
12 We didn't like him anyway. We didn't want him in the battalion."

13 So, Colonel Dorsey said, "All right." And he talked to General Khan who was a
14 Commandant of the Vietnamese Marine Corps. He said, "I'm going to send my best
15 advisor over to the 5th Battalion." And that was John Ripley. And so Ripley was there
16 until I showed up, they had sent Ripley over temporarily from the 3rd Battalion to babysit
17 the 5th Battalion. So the situation had improved. By the time I got there and relieved John,

18 I didn't have any trouble with Lich or with Ba. I just kept my mouth shut. I would
19 speak a little bit of Vietnamese, but I wouldn't say anything. There was nothing going on
20 so there was no reason to say anything. I just did a lot of reading of paperback books and
21 hung around in my bunker. There was nothing going on.

22 KC: When you say nothing going on, you mean?

23 DP: No fighting.

24 KC: Were there going out on patrols, I would assume?

25 DP: There were patrols out, but we were not allowed to go out on patrols. We
26 would go if the battalion went or if Alpha or Bravo went, but we did not go out on unit
27 small patrols. We were not allowed to go into the DMZ either. That was strictly
28 forbidden.

29 KC: Sure, sure. Tell me about life with the 5th Marines prior to the kickoff of the
30 Easter Offensive.

1 DP: Well, it was very humdrum. We would, as I said, there was a lot of reading,
2 there was a lot of sleeping. It was funny, when we were taken out of the field and going
3 down to Saigon or we went on R&R to Hawaii or Australia or so on, we would say, “It’s
4 time to go back to the field so we can get some rest.” Because we had been so active on
5 R&R.

6 I would stay busy trying to plot possible targets, possible avenues of approach
7 into our position. I paid a lot of attention to the weather because if we had bad weather, I
8 knew we couldn’t get close air support. I paid a lot of attention to where we were in
9 relationship to how far inland the naval gunfire could fire. I looked at where the ARVN
10 batteries were laid and whether or not we could get fire from them. Basically I checked
11 everything in terms of fire support for the battalion. I plotted bridges I thought where we
12 would be isolated and then possible ways where we could cross the river. There was
13 forwarding sights and just basically doing a battle space reconnaissance, if you will.

14 KC: So if you are with the 5th Marines when the Easter Offensive kicks off?

15 DP: No, we got into one fight, the 5th Battalion on the night of 12-13, December
16 1971. This was an NVA reconnaissance unit that had penetrated into the DMZ and they
17 were discovered by Regional and Popular Forces. I was able to adjust some naval gunfire
18 in the area and we killed seventeen of them. Then the next morning the villagers laid
19 them out in the marketplace like dead desperados in the old Wild West. I didn’t like that.
20 I thought they should have been given a decent burial. They were just doing their job
21 coming down and trying to make a reconnaissance into South Vietnam. As I examined
22 the bodies, they had suffered massive shrapnel wounds indicating the shards from the
23 naval gunfire rounds had hit in their vicinity.

24 They moved us off of—we were moved off of Con Thien and we moved over to
25 Gio Linh to where the naval gunfire liaison team was, the ANGLICO team. When we got
26 there, that was on 21 December and we had a heavy barrage of mortar, artillery, and
27 rocket fire and several of our Marines were killed.

28 A few nights later, I was sitting on top of a bunker with Gio Linh, my new
29 assistant Skip Wells. We were looking into the DMZ with our binoculars. Out to the west
30 we spot dozens of signal flares going off into the mountains and the flares were moving
31 southward and there were other lights up there. That was the indication that maybe the

1 North Vietnamese were on the move. Then, there was some Air Force forward observers
2 that were coming up there. They could not fly north of the Binh Hai River, but they could
3 fly around south of the Ben Hai River. I asked this observer to check the beach, which
4 was to our east, of course, to see if they saw any tracks. He came back very excited and
5 he said, "I see tank tracks down there on the sand." So I started thinking, "Uh oh, we've
6 got flares going off in the mountains over to our west that are moving ever southward and
7 now we've got tank tracks on the beach over to our east and we've got activity in front of
8 us and something's going to happen. It was like deja vu before the Tet Offensive in '67.
9 Anyway, when we were up there on Gio Linh, there was a first lieutenant by the name of
10 Bruggeman. There was a lance corporal, a really dynamic Marine, an Irish charmer. His
11 name was James Worth. His nickname was "Diamond Jim." He was just a fun young man
12 to be around. Then there was a guy from Missouri, another lieutenant, Joel Eisenstein.
13 From Gio Linh, you could look into the DMZ and you could see the customs house on
14 the north side of the Binh Hai River, the North Vietnamese customs house. There was a
15 thick, black pole there with a big North Vietnamese flag flying on it. So you could really
16 look into North Vietnam. Joel Eisenstein and Lieutenant Bruggeman used to take turns to
17 see if they could knock down that flag with naval gunfire, but they were never able to do
18 it.

19 From Gio Linh, the 5th Battalion went to—we went back to another fire base
20 called C-2, where the Army was. Not much went on there. The Ruff Puffs got in another
21 fight with the NVA, because the NVA were coming down in reconnaissance and it later
22 turned out they were probing all the fire bases to see how the battalions were deployed on
23 the firebases just south of the DMZ. The battalion went back to Saigon on a stand down
24 and two weeks of liberty and then we came back up. We went to another fire base, I can't
25 remember, Pedro, we were there for a while.

26 Then we went back to Saigon on another stand down and I had an American
27 girlfriend in Saigon and I would stay with her whenever I went to Saigon. I always told
28 my boss, Major Bob Sheridan where I was and I took him to the apartment and he
29 showed him how he could get a hold of me. It was in a compound, a big walled
30 compound with a big locked, gated fence around it. It was not in right down Saigon, but
31 just south of the airfield at Tan Son Nhut. Anyway, I was down there and I didn't watch

1 television or listen to the radio and I was just kind of isolated. One morning, very early,
2 there was a knock on the door and it was Sheridan. He said, "Grab your gear, we're going
3 to the field." I said, "What's going on?" He had a copy of *Stars and Stripes* and he
4 showed me the headline that said, "100,000 North Vietnamese crossed the DMZ." I
5 thought, "Holy shit." This was, oh, that was in the first week in March. So I had about
6 five minutes to get my pack and helmet and web gear and weapon and everything and get
7 out the door and get in the Jeep and away we went out to where the Brigade 369 was
8 home base. This was at a place called Di An, which was the former home base of the 1st
9 Infantry Division. The U.S Army 1st Infantry Division, the Big Red One. So, Sheridan
10 dropped me off with the 5th Battalion. He went all around Saigon rounding up all the
11 Brigade 369 advisors. The other two battalion advisors, myself, the assistant battalion
12 advisors, the assistant brigade advisors. He said it was like rounding up his children and
13 taking them to the first day of school. We stayed there that night and then the trucks
14 picked us up the next morning. A huge convoy of trucks and took us to Bien Hoa and
15 then Air Force C-130s flew us in from, the ones that we were on, they had flown in from
16 Taiwan and picked us up and flew us up to I Corps. We couldn't go near the DMZ
17 because there was a lot of fighting going on. So they dropped the 5th Battalion off at the
18 Hue-Phu Bai airfield which is south of Hue City. The battalion offloaded there and we
19 marched out to the perimeter of the airfield and provided security and we stayed there for
20 a couple of nights. You could hear the B-52 strikes going in up to the north.

21 Finally, they loaded us up again on trucks and took us up Route One. When we
22 got about five miles north of Hue City, off the trucks we went, and we marched west out
23 to the old firebase by the name of Jane. That was at the exit of the Ba Long river Valley
24 and this area was known as the Hai Lang National Forrest. It was really a very thick
25 jungle. So we were out there on Route One and our mission was to hold Firebase Jane,
26 because they were afraid that the North Vietnamese were going to come out of the Ba
27 Long River Valley and cut Route One and isolate all the troops that were fighting to the
28 north. That included two brigades of Vietnamese Marines up there, Brigade 147 and
29 Brigade 258. So that's how we got back into it. That's when the fighting really started. It
30 had been going on. When Bob Sheridan picked me up, he said Walter Boomer and Ray
31 Smith are missing. Walter had been up on Sarge where I had been and Ray had been over

1 on Nui Ba Ho where Jassem had been and no one had heard from him. That battalion that
2 they were with, the 4th Battalion, had essentially been fragmented, if not destroyed. As it
3 turned out, they both escaped and evaded to Mai Loc where Jim Joy was. That's where
4 they met up.

5 Then the North Vietnamese—the astounding thing that happened was the 56th
6 ARVN Regiment up at Camp Carroll surrendered to the North Vietnamese. The whole
7 regiment surrendered to include all of the artillery that was there, a 175-millimeter gun.
8 I've since gone back to Vietnam and I had seen the 175-millimeter gun in the war
9 museum in Hanoi, the same gun. They brought it all the way up the Ho Chi Minh Trail to
10 Hanoi and put it on display. Inside of that Camp Carroll, the 56th Regiment, the
11 commander, had been the hero of Hue City during the Tet Offensive. I think his name
12 was Dinh. He had been the commander of the Hac Long , the Black Panther reaction
13 company for the 1st Division. He had been a big hero during the Tet Offensive. But when
14 he was surrounded up at Camp Carroll, he got cold feet and they were talking on the
15 radio to the North Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese saying, "It's useless, we've got
16 you surrounded, give up." So he had a conference which he excluded the American
17 advisors from and they decided—they all agreed in writing that they would surrender and
18 they radioed to the North Vietnamese that effect—I can't remember the day, at 1100
19 hours, they were going to lay down their arms and open up the gates into Camp Carroll.

20 So the battalion or the regimental executive officer who was very anti-American,
21 told the senior advisor Army lieutenant colonel by the name of Camper. His assistant,
22 Major Brown, that they were going to surrender and they had two choices. One they
23 could surrender with them, or they could commit suicide. Campers said, "The hell with
24 that." So he gathered up some of his most trustworthy of his Vietnamese who were
25 willing to fight and he called Jim Joy of Mai Loc and said, "They're surrendering and
26 we've got to get out of here." So Camper goes out through the wire and through the mine
27 fields and gets outside the wire and it so happens that there is a chopper inbound to Mai
28 Loc with a sling of artillery ammunition. Jim Joy says, "Drop that ammo as soon as you
29 can and get over to Camp Carroll. There's two American advisors that are outside the
30 wire. The ARVN has surrendered, we've got to rescue them." That's what did happen.
31 There's a very good account of this in *Trial by Fire* by—I can't remember his name,

1 Andrade, by Andrade and there's a good account of it in Gerry Turley's book, *The Easter*
2 *Offensive*. It's very well documented. The guy who surrendered later became the mayor
3 of Da Nang.

4 KC: Is that right?

5 DP: Under the communists. That was his reward. That was very demoralizing to
6 lose an entire regiment just like that and then not know where Walter Boomer and Ray
7 Smith were. That was greatly disturbing.

8 KC: What goes through your mind when you were in a situation like that? These
9 guys are out there somewhere, it looks bad, there's no contact with them. What sort of
10 things do you think about? What sort of things do you think you can do?

11 DP: Well, number one you pray. Number two, you see that the only way you can
12 really help him is by fighting the North Vietnamese and bring as much pressure to bear
13 on them. You just don't know, you didn't know.

14 When they walked into Mai Loc, Ray Smith had come off Nui Ba Ho and he had
15 to throw himself on the wire and let the Vietnamese Marines walk across the top of him
16 and Smith got all tangled up in the concertina wire and lost most of his jungle suit. When
17 he came in, he was in rags, he had lost most of his clothing.

18 Walter had heard the North Vietnamese saying, "*Covan, Covan.*" Which means
19 advisor. They knew there was an advisor in the vicinity and they knew they were really
20 beating the bush trying to get a hold of Walter, to grab him. Walter had been a cross-
21 country runner at Duke. Tall, slim, extremely strong and lots of endurance. They had
22 their hands full trying to catch him. He had to come clear down this mountain through
23 this very treacherous terrain. He had tried to keep some of the Vietnamese together and
24 some semblance of a unit. He had met up with one lieutenant that he knew and this
25 lieutenant had some Vietnamese Marines that were sticking together elbow-to-elbow and
26 Walter joined up with these people. Walter had tried to take his radio off the hill which
27 was heavy. The damn thing wasn't working so finally he had decided to destroy it. This
28 was one of those classified radios that you can use with encryption. He was very worried
29 that the North Vietnamese would find the radio and then exploit it for intelligence
30 purposes. He had no choice but to get rid of it.

1 In the meantime, before he was run off the hill, the radio research bunker took a
2 direct hit and those two Marines that I played cards with up there on Sarge were killed.
3 Their bodies were never recovered. I said the names a while ago. They escape me now.
4 Westcott and Crosby. They're still listed as MIA presumed killed. The bunker took a
5 direct hit and collapsed and caught on fire. Walter tried to get them out, but it was
6 impossible, they were dead.

7 KC: As the Easter Offensive continues to grind on, what do you find yourself
8 doing with the Vietnamese Marines? What is your story here?

9 DP: Well, as I said, we were up on Jane [Note: Narrator mistakes Sarge for Jane,
10 corrected later in interview]. As we were marching out to Jane, I saw a gunship, a South
11 Vietnamese gunship make a low-altitude run. I think he was firing at Jane because there
12 were North Vietnamese up there. I saw him fire a missile. Then in my mind's eye, I said,
13 "That missile didn't come from the gunship, that missile came from the ground." I
14 thought, some dummy, dumb NVA tried to fire a RPG-7 at the helicopter. I said, "He's
15 going to pay for that." The gunship went into a tight orbit and came back around and
16 fired and zoom, up came another missile and it hit that helicopter in the tail boom. That
17 tail boom came off, it was on fire, and it went down just like that. I said, "Oh man,
18 they've got the SA-7. They've got the Grail, they've got the Stella." As we approached
19 Jane, we captured some NVA. These guys were shellshocked from all the stuff that had
20 been going on. The B-52 strikes in the area and basically they just gave up. I ask him, this
21 one, "Do you have a new missile?" and he says, "Yes." "How does it work?" And he
22 says, "When the sun shines in the sight and the baby cries, it's ready to fire." So, having
23 studied the missile after it becomes active, after the Warsaw Pact had gotten it, I knew
24 they had a sight reticle that they looked through. When the IR became hot enough from
25 the tailpipe of the jet exhaust or the turbine exhaust from the helicopter, that this little
26 light would go on and this was "the sun." Then when it was optimum time to fire, a little
27 horn would go off and that told the gunner, "Go ahead and shoot." And I hadn't thought
28 about the Grail being there. It was a surprise to me.

29 So we got up to Jane and we kicked the NVA off Jane and I had this radio that I
30 could encrypt, but that encryption system ate battery power like crazy so we didn't like to
31 do that. Sometimes we would and we would set up an appointed time to come up to talk

1 in the covered sequence. So, we got up there and I called Bob Sheridan in an encrypted
2 mode and I explained to him about this missile that was there. He's saying, "Are you
3 sure?" He said, "Do you have the missile?" And I said, "No." But I said, "We're going to
4 find one sooner or later, believe me." He said, "Okay, I want you to write a statement and
5 have a courier bring it down to me." And that's what I did. I gave the specifics of the
6 missile, how I knew about it, how it was fired, shoulder launched. It launched Mach 3
7 plus speed, 2,500 meter altitude, and so on." We got the message and then he put aboard
8 a helicopter that went down to Da Nang to the headquarters which is called the FRAC
9 That sounds like a dirty word, but it's the First Regional Assistance Command run by a
10 major general down in Da Nang and it just disappeared into a black hole. No one
11 believed us, no one believed it.

12 Also, we had reported that the 130 guns were up there. No one believed that,
13 either. They believed the tanks because they could see them. They had seen the tanks.
14 Then, a couple of days later a FAC, a Forward Air Controller out at Da Nang with an
15 ANCLICO Marine captain was flying in an OV-10 Bronco. They got shot down by an
16 SA-7. When they were shot down, the pilot said that he had been shot down by a small
17 missile. They went down pretty close to Gio Linh over near the beach and the lieutenant
18 was captured, his name was Potts. He was a black kid, Larry Fletcher Potts. He was
19 captured and he died of unknown circumstances just north of the DMZ in some type of
20 temporary prison in that area. If they had paid attention—and they were orbiting at about
21 a thousand feet which is deadly when the SA-7 is firing at you. That's the worst situation
22 you could be in at that level. You've got to get high.

23 Well, once that OV-10 was shot down, overnight, the forward air controllers were
24 ordered not to go below ten thousand feet. When you've got a FAC at ten thousand feet,
25 he can't control air and that is what had happened and that's what I thought back in
26 Germany. If they ever get that Strella on the battlefield, it's going to change the way
27 close air support is done overnight and that's exactly what happened.

28 Now, there was another thing that—there was another weapon on the battlefield
29 that the Vietnamese were telling us about that was controlled by wires. I didn't know
30 anything about this, but later it turned out it was the Sagger, the AT-3 Sagger, a anti-tank
31 missile system. It was carried by a two-man team and in a suitcase type thing. It has these

1 two thin wires that reel out from behind like a Garcia spinning reel. The operators can fly
2 it. They've got a joystick and they can fly the missile right into the tank.

3 Well, they tried to hit Jim Joy's Jeep when he was moving from one position to
4 another and they missed. The wires went over the top of his Jeep and got caught up on
5 the Jeep and then the missile exploded on the side of the road. Well, Jim stopped and got
6 that missile, what was left of it and you could see the wires were still attached to the rear
7 end of the missile. He rolled up the wire and he put the remains of the missile and the
8 wire inside an empty C-ration box and we sent that down to FRAC , too.

9 Well, by this time they were starting to listen to us that these weapons were on
10 the battlefield. The SA-7, the 130 gun. We told them that there were a variety of tanks on
11 the battlefield. Not just one, not the T-54, there were PC-76s, the amphibious tanks.
12 There were also tanks that were equipped with Z-23 Quad 4, like a Duster machinegun.
13 Basically, they had all of the arms and equipment that the Warsaw Pact had, and that is
14 what we were up against.

15 KC: What did higher headquarters do in response to your providing all this down
16 to FRAC?

17 DP: Well, the only thing that we saw they did was set the FACs up to 10,000 feet
18 and then they wouldn't let the fighters drop any bombs unless there were troops actually
19 in contact. There was an American on the ground to control the airstrike. That was about
20 the only thing that we saw. In the meantime, we had our hands full over on Jane, trying to
21 keep a hold of Jane.

22 KC: Tell me about that. I think that's a fascinating part that we haven't gotten to
23 yet. Tell me about trying to keep hold of Jane.

24 DP: Well, I proposed to the battalion commander that he make a reconnaissance
25 in force into the Hai Lang Forest which was about a thousand meters to our west. To see
26 if the NVA were staging in there for an attack on us. So he agreed and he sent Major Ba
27 and I sent Captain Wells with two companies and they went into the Hai Lang e and they
28 got into a big fight and Major Ba was killed. His body was left behind. Skip Wells barely
29 got out of there with his life. And so it confirmed what I thought that there was a staging
30 area over there and that they were building up the forces for a major attack on Jane.

1 Now, then Skip made it back to Sarge and Major Ba's death really demoralized
2 the battalion. There was quite a number of Vietnamese Marines who were killed at the
3 same time that Major Ba was killed. I knew he had to hold onto this hill because as they
4 broke through and then they cut Route One, then all my friends who were north of us
5 would be stranded up there. Especially if the North Vietnamese got to the bridges and
6 blew the bridges and they would be cut off. The only way for them to get out of there
7 would be to escape and evade out to the beach and be picked up by naval gunfire ships.
8 We didn't want that.

9 About this time, they we started getting a lot off these 66-millimeter light anti-
10 tank assault weapons, LAAWs. Because we didn't really have anything to fight the tanks
11 with. One night, we were up on Jane and the sun is just going down and it's very quiet.
12 I'll be damned, if I don't hear a tank crank up the engine and do a neutral steer, that is,
13 they just pull one track and then they pivot on the other track and then shut down again.
14 The goddamn tank was within about a thousand meters of us. You know, at night the
15 sound carries a lot way and the Vietnamese started jabbering that there was tanks in their
16 vicinity. They were afraid of the tanks and so was I.

17 The tank has three things, it has shock and it scares you. It has firepower in its
18 main gun and it has mobility. Those three things. So this was one of the few times I really
19 got to give some good advice to the battalion commander. I told him that we had just
20 gotten a resupply of mortar ammunition and he should unload those boxes and mortars
21 and spread them out through the battalions for the Marines to carry. Then the next
22 morning, to send working parties down on the most likely avenues of approaches onto
23 our position, dig holes and bury those boxes in those holes and the North Vietnamese
24 observers would see them doing that and think that we had planted box mines on the most
25 likely avenue approach. He thought that was a great idea and at first light they sent the
26 Marines down there, well-armed working parties dug the holes and buried the boxes. I
27 think just through that simple ploy, that we held the tanks at bay for several days. They
28 never did come in through our position with tanks. I think it was because of those boxes
29 down there.

30 However, they finally did overrun Jane and they fired a lot of artillery at Jane.
31 Skip Wells, bless his heart, was out in front of the—he was on another hill, forward of

1 Jane and they got overrun and he had the radio on his back, literally shot off his back. He
2 passed out from heat exhaustion. That was another thing that was hot. We were out of
3 water and he was a big guy. He played professional football at one point. I had to
4 medevac him that night.

5 Then Lich, as we suspected, he took off. He started running for Route One. I
6 called Bob Sheridan and I said, "He's bugging out." Sheridan went to the brigade
7 commander, Lieutenant Colonel Chung. Chung called Lich on the radio and I could see
8 Lich. He was about, oh, three hundred yards ahead of me. I was watching him through
9 my binoculars and he got this radio call from Lieutenant Colonel Chung. Chung told him
10 if he didn't stop running, he was going to come over there and shoot him and kill him. So
11 Lich stopped and then he came back like a penitent child and he said, "What did you tell
12 Major Sheridan?" "I told him that you were leaving your battalion behind." "Oh no, I just
13 displaced, I just displaced." "Bullshit, we've got to fight here. You can't fight off of the
14 low ground. You can't fight from Route One; you've got to stay here."

15 Well, he didn't want to be up on Jane anymore. So I decided to stay up on Jane
16 because I had a radio antenna up there and I could communicate. That night, the NVA
17 were up on a hill and they were in the same trench line with me and I could hear them
18 talking. I got up in what they call a bunny hole. It's a hole that you dig up the side of the
19 trench that protects you from napalm when it comes down the trench line. You put a
20 bamboo screen door and pull it in. Then you've got another bamboo pipe hollow that you
21 can breathe through. So I spent the night inside the bunny hole and I could hear them
22 talking, as I said, and moving up and down the trench. Then the next day I called in
23 strikes right on top of Sarge. They left and I was able to get off the hill. I was by myself
24 up there because I had to medevac Skip Wells two days before.

25 At that point, we lost Jane. The battalion was really beaten up and so Colonel
26 Chung pulled us off and brought us down to the bridgehead at the My Chanh River where
27 we set in as the brigade reserve and we protected the village that was right there north of
28 the My Chanh River. By then I had lost a lot of my hearing. I couldn't hear very well. I
29 couldn't talk on the radio very well. There was some concern about that. Basically we
30 were working as fire support coordination officers. We really weren't advisors anymore.

1 They didn't need any advice on how to fight; they knew how to fight. But they didn't
2 know how to call in airstrike, naval gunfire, medevac choppers, and so on.

3 KC: That's fascinating. To be held up in a bunny hole that entire night with the
4 enemy. What goes through your mind in a situation like that?

5 DP: Well, you're terrified. And I had lost—my bodyguard had been killed and he
6 had been carrying one of those short M-16s. I think you could call it the M-18. I can't
7 remember the name of it. So all I had was my .45 and I couldn't talk on the radio for fear
8 of them hearing me. It was a long night. They were as tired and as frightened as I was.
9 After I ran the airstrikes on the hill the next day, I looked at some of the bodies and they
10 were little fifteen-, sixteen-year-old kids. But we pulled off of there, as I said.

11 Then the fighting was still going on to the north of us, that way was where Charlie
12 Goode, Emmett Huff, Jim Joy, and the guys that were with Brigade 147 and the Brigade
13 258 and all of the ARVN 3rd Division had collapsed at that point and all the stragglers
14 were coming down the road headed toward Hue City. Here again, I saw all this and I said,
15 "You know, those people are voting with their feet. They do not want to be subject of the
16 North Vietnamese. They are heading south. They're not staying there and welcoming the
17 North Vietnamese with open arms." Now, there was another thing that happened and I
18 haven't read about this in any of this histories of Vietnam, but to the east of Route One
19 was rice paddies. Further east were the sand dunes out on the beach of the South of China
20 Sea. In those rice paddies were a number of villages, a lot of villages. These were
21 Catholics who had fled from North Vietnam in 1954, came south of the DMZ and
22 established their villages there. They had been organized into Regional and Popular
23 Forces, outfits, troops. These Ruff Puffs decided to fight. They fought like crazy over
24 there and a lot of them in Alamo type situations fought 'til the last man and the NVA
25 were really surprised at the resistance the local militias put up. That was the area north of
26 the My Chan River, clear up to the Bien Hai. It was like a box. Route One, Bien Hai My
27 Chanh River, South China Sea shoreline, and the My Chan River. Their heroic resistance
28 over there stalled the North Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese were not able to get
29 through the Ruff Puffs over on that side.

30 KC: Wow, that's fascinating stuff. So fascinating, of course, now I have to run up
31 against our time for today.

1 **Session [8] of [9]**

2 **Date: 3 December 2010**

3 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with
4 Colonel Donald Price. Today is December 3, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Colonel
5 Price is joining me by telephone from his home in Sierra Vista, Arizona. Okay Colonel,
6 we had you there in the Easter Offensive. You were talking about last time the defense of
7 Firebase Jane. For the people listening to this interview and reading the transcript, you
8 and I are both looking at the same book right now which is Gerry Turley's book, *The*
9 *Easter Offensive*. We're looking at the same maps as we're going through this, as well.
10 So pick up the action and pick up your experiences from about that time.

11 Donald Price: Well, I was up on Firebase Jane as I told you in the last interview.
12 Our mission was to hold onto Jane and to prevent the North Vietnamese from coming out
13 of the Hai Lang Forest to the west from coming down the Ba Long River Valley and to
14 keep Route One open in case there was going to be a retreat out of Quang Tri proper.
15 Now there were two Army advisory team compounds in the vicinity of Quang Tri City.
16 One was at Ai Tuand this was at team 155. The other was a smaller compound in Quang
17 TriCity proper called the Tiger Pad. It had been there for years. The one at the Ai Tu
18 combat base was co-located with the 3rd ARVN Division headquarters commanded by
19 General Giai. Giai was an excellent officer. He had a very good combat record and he
20 was a former deputy commander of the 1st ARVN Division out of Hue City. His advisor
21 was an Army colonel by the name of Metcalf. In Gerry Turley's book he gives him a
22 different name, but his real name was Metcalfe. Metcalf and General Giai stayed very
23 close together. As the pressure increased on Ai Tu combat base, it was decided to move
24 to the Tiger Pad in Quang Tri City. So General Giai and Colonel Metcalf took all of
25 Team 155 and all of the 3rd ARVN Division Headquarters and moved it into Quang Tri
26 City. They left Gerry Turley behind in the bunker, the command and control bunker of
27 the 3rd ARVN Division at the Ai Tu combat base. There were several volunteers that
28 stayed with Colonel Turley to include Major Golden who was a naval gunfire officer, a
29 Marine ANGLICO, and there was an Air Force officer, Major David Brookbank and then
30 there were some other Marines there with Gerry to include Jim Murray who had been a
31 Navy Cross recipient from the 5th Marines.

1 You have to understand about the 3rd ARVN Division was put together with
2 Regional and Popular Force troops. This was a violation of the contract that the
3 government had with Regional and Popular Force troops. Regional Force troops are to be
4 used only in their home district and Popular Force troops are only supposed to be used in
5 their home hamlet or village. These troops were pulled out of the hamlets and the districts
6 and put into battalions and moved clear up on the DMZ away from their homes. Not only
7 that, the jails and the brigs were emptied out in Hue City and in I Corps and took these
8 jail birds and turned them into soldiers and moved them up to the firebases in northern
9 Quang Tri. So, the 3rd ARVN Division was shaky at best. It was a terrible division, to be
10 frank. So they were ready to bug out at any minute.

11 What really precipitated the retreat, if you could call it that out of Quang Tri,
12 General Giai ordered the 20th Tank Battalion back out of the area just south of the river,
13 the Mai Loc River. The river where Ripley had blown the bridge. The 3rd ARVN troops
14 saw the tanks pulling out and so they decided to pull out, too. At this time, it looked like
15 that Quang Tri City was going to fall. Colonel Metcalf asked Major Joy, who was the
16 senior advisor to Vietnamese Marine Brigade 147, if he wanted to take his advisors or go
17 with Team 155. When they were going to be extracted by helicopter. Jim Joy said no,
18 they were going to stay with brigade 147 under Colonel Bao. Some of the advisors who
19 were with Jim Joy included Emmett Huff who had been the battalion operations officer
20 1/7 in 1967 when I was in that battalion. Thomas Gnibus who was an artillery officer.
21 Charlie Goode who was an infantry officer. He was also a qualified naval aerial observer.
22 There was a captain by the name of Skip Cruieger. There was also a civilian who had been
23 working for the U.S. Information Service as a radio tech, I believe in Quang Tri. So they
24 stuck with Brigade 147.

25 Now, one thing that has to be noted is that there were no less than twenty-seven
26 infantry battalions, maneuver battalions, up in Quang Tri Province that belonged to the
27 ARVN. This included three Ranger groups. Ranger groups consisted of three battalions.
28 Ranger battalion is not very big, its only about five or six hundred men. They have crew-
29 served weapons, but they don't have mortars. They're a very fast moving outfit.

30 Also, the North Vietnamese had attacked when the weather was poor to negate the
31 air support. As the offensive went on, the weather got better and so we were able to bring

1 more and more air support to bear. At this time, there were, oh, seventeen naval gunfire
2 ships on the gun line off of Quang Tri in the Tonkin Gulf. They were being orchestrated
3 by Major Golden. This included an eight-inch cruiser, the U.S.S *Newport News*, CA-148,
4 three six-inch cruisers, and twelve five-inch destroyers. They were all on the gun line.
5 Now, the gradient of the beach under water offshore, is very shallow. It just doesn't drop
6 off abruptly. So this pushed the naval gunfire ships even further out. I think, if I
7 remember correctly that naval gunfire ships can only come in to the eight fathom line. So
8 the ships were pushed way off the beach.

9 Meanwhile, the North Vietnamese knew the ranges of all those ships. They stayed
10 just outside that range and that's where they had the 130 guns that could fire with
11 impunity into our positions. That was the biggest headache we had was the 130 and the
12 122-millimeter field guns. What I would say now was classified. I don't think it is
13 anymore, but there were some SEALs operating up there in the river right there north of
14 Quang Tri. I think it's not the Bien Hai, maybe it's on the map there.

15 KC: There's the Thach Han River?

16 DP: What is it?

17 KC: The Thach Han.

18 DP: Yeah, the Thach Han \. The SEALs were trying to prevent the North
19 Vietnamese from using that river for resupply purposes and also the TT-76, the swimmer
20 tanks were coming across that river. So the SEALs planted some mines in the river.
21 These were self-destructing mines. They would stay active and armed for a certain
22 number of days and then they would self-destruct. A naval aerial observer with a SEAL
23 in the backseat would go up and check on the mines that were tethered in the river. Lo
24 and behold they had seen one of the mines that had broken loose from its tether and was
25 drifting down the river out into the Gulf of Tonkin and it would come possible in the
26 vicinity of the gun line. About this time, a Navy admiral on the gun line, his chopper
27 went down and he and his crew were killed. So the mine and the loss of the admiral
28 caused the ships to be pulled off the gun line until such time had elapsed in the mine that
29 it drifted loose would explode.

30 Now, when this happened, this was when Quang Tri Province fell. We couldn't
31 get any naval gunfire and we didn't know why. Some of the gunfire that we had to adjust

1 had what was called a rocket assisted projectile. A rocket attached to the end of the naval
2 gunfire round. When it got so far in its trajectory, the rocket propellant would kick in and
3 it would give a boost to the projectile and it would add to its range. But, because it was a
4 rocket, it had a tendency to make the naval gunfire round go ballistic and become very
5 unstable. It was very difficult to adjust these RAP rounds at the maximum range.

6 Back to General Giai and the Army colonel, his counterpart, General Giai decided
7 to leave Quang Tri because the NVA were going to launch a major attack on the city,
8 starting with the ten thousand rounds of artillery fire at 1700 on a given day toward the
9 end of April. From all indications of intelligence they had the capability to do that and
10 were going to do that. So, General Giai gets in three armored personnel carriers and he
11 leaves the Tiger Pad and he's going to join the exodus, the retreat out of Quang Tri. He
12 gets down the road, finds himself in a traffic jam. So he turns around and cuts back up to
13 the Tiger Pad where Colonel Metcalf e has called Da Nang and asks for, not a medevac
14 but evacuation helicopters. I think they were CH53s; they were big choppers. So, General
15 Giai and Colonel Metcalf are on the first chopper. No, I'm wrong. General Giai was on
16 the first chopper out and took three trips to get everybody out. Colonel Metcalf was on
17 the last chopper out. They safely evacuated Team 155 and the commanding general of the
18 3rd ARVN Division out of Quang Tri City.

19 They flew over Brigade 147 and Jim Joy and all the Marine advisors saw them
20 going. They decided to head toward the beach. They moved east and then they started
21 south because Route One was so congested. The 147 pulled all three battalions in close
22 together and they tucked in tight for the night. The next day, the ARVN that were around
23 them continued to just turn into a mob, every man for himself. Somehow, Jim Joy and the
24 advisors got separated from Colonel Bao who was on an armored personnel carrier. The
25 Marine advisors were left out in the sand dunes east of Route One in the Hai Lang area.
26 The night before, I was down on near the bridge on the My Chanh River and Charlie
27 Goode called me. He got ahold of me; he searched through the frequencies and he told
28 me, if anything happens, here are the names of the guys who are here. He didn't give
29 specific names, but he gave the initials and told me what their jobs were. I knew who was
30 with Jim Joy and Charlie and if anything was going to happen. Essentially they were
31 surrounded. The next day—I could hear the fighting going on to the north; it was very

1 intense. Thousands of stragglers were coming past my position at the My Chanh River
2 Bridge. We had abandoned Firebase Jane and that was a big mistake because the NVA
3 had come out of the Ba Long River Valley and they were right on Route One. So
4 essentially they had control over Route One in that area.

5 Jin Joy and Emmett Huff tried to set up a little tactical operation center on a sand
6 dune and tried to orchestrate some fire in air support, but it was impossible because of all
7 the ARVN deserters that were flocking around them. So they asked for an extraction. It
8 just so happened there was an Army brigadier general named Bowen who was the deputy
9 commander of FRAC, Forward Regional Assistance Command out of Da Nang. So
10 General Bowen ordered his pilots to go in and pick them up. That was extremely hairy.
11 They got on the chopper and the chopper was just barely airborne and Emmett Huff was
12 riding a skid and he was trying to hold onto Captain Crueger. The chopper pilot saw that
13 Captain Crueger was about to drop and so he landed again and enabled Skip Crueger and
14 Major Huff to get aboard. The aircraft struggled and struggled and finally got airborne. It
15 came south right down Route One and flew over my position. I looked up and I saw an
16 individual hanging to the skid. It wasn't an American; it was a Vietnamese. The chopper
17 was just streaming fluid. I don't know if it was hydraulic fluid or aviation fuel, but they
18 were able to get south of the My Chanh River and they landed the helicopter at Camp
19 Evans and it was totaled. That helicopter never flew again.

20 It was just so chaotic. Everything was coming apart. It's very difficult to control
21 a retreat, especially if men are panicked. The only ones who really didn't panic and stuck
22 elbow-to-elbow through all this fighting were the Vietnamese Marines, the Airborne, and
23 the Rangers. Even though the Rangers headed clear over to the coast and walked down
24 the beach toward Hue City. That's not anything derogatory. I would have probably done
25 the same thing if I was a Ranger commander to get away from Route One.

26 Parts of Route One were a death trap and there was about a three quarters of a
27 mile stretch that became known as the "Highway or Horror" where about two thousand
28 civilians and military were killed by the NVA with 130 gunfire and there was trucks and
29 Jeeps and motor scooters and it was all bumper to bumper through this three quarters of a
30 mile stretch of road. The animals got in there and there were just dead people
31 everywhere. Whole families killed. It was just a terrible situation. That was basically the

1 retreat out of Quang Tri. I wouldn't call it a retreat , but it would be an abandonment of
2 Quang Tri.

3 They were finally—at this time, the NVA had over stretched themselves. They
4 were having difficulty bringing up supplies and it was very intensive B-52 strikes going
5 into the vicinity of Quang Tri, especially between the beach and Route One where there
6 was a lot of B-52 activity in that area. At night, the ground just shook from the B-52s.

7 When the last remnants of this retreat, this mob passed over the My Chanh River
8 Bridge, the brigade commander of 369, Colonel Chung, told Bob Sheridan that the bridge
9 had to be destroyed. There were two bridges there. There was a railroad bridge and then
10 there was a very heavy duty wooden bridge. So Bob called me up and he said, “Donny,
11 destroy the bridge.” I said, “How the hell am I supposed to do that? I don't have any
12 explosives.” He said, “I don't know, but do it.”

13 So, I looked around and I saw there were some abandoned vehicles there and I
14 had the Vietnamese open up the gas tanks and pour gasoline, syphon gas tanks and put
15 the gasoline into their helmets. And then we set up a bucket brigade in which we carried
16 the gasoline out on the bridge and spread the gasoline on the bridge. Then I had a signal
17 flare and after we had put as much gas on the bridge as we could and also diesel fuel, I
18 had a signal flare emergency. One of the little tiny ones the Air Force has and I popped
19 that flare and I set the bridge on fire. That bridge burned for days. It could be seen from
20 everywhere. So it was a good orientation mark for the aerial observers and for the fighter
21 pilots. They could see the burning bridge. It helped orienting them for airstrike. As for the
22 railroad bridge, there was nothing I could do about that. I had the Vietnamese set up a
23 106 recoilless rifle on the south bank of the My Chanh that would cross the railroad
24 bridge.

25 That was it, we lost Quang Tri Province. It was all over. At this time, General
26 Giai was down at the Citadel in Hue City. I don't know if he got fired then, but the real
27 culprit was the general by the name of Lam. He was the I Corps commander. He was
28 more of a politician than he was a general. He was very big in reading horoscopes and he
29 had his own personal fortune teller and he loved to gamble. They called him “Old Bloody
30 Hands” because wherever he put his hands on a map, that was where men were going to
31 die. That was especially true in Quang Tri. So President Thieu called him to Saigon and

1 they had a conference down there and Thieu relieved him of command, but because he
2 was so politically powerful, he gave him a made-up position in the government.
3 Something like liaison officer to the JGS, which is the Joint General Staff. He made him
4 this errand boy between the president and the JGS. Well, Lam came back from the
5 conference with the president and his advisor, General Bowen said he'd never seen Lam
6 happier because he was being relieved of command, but he was not going to be in
7 trouble. They had to have a scapegoat and the scapegoat was General Giai. Those were
8 some of the things that were going on down there.

9 Now, before the bridge was burned, there were a couple other things that took
10 place. Let's see, on April 30th, the road was just jammed with refugees. There was one
11 bridge north of the My Chanh River that we wanted to keep open so that Brigade 147
12 could come across it. So Colonel Chung, the brigade commander, ordered the 5th
13 Battalion to go up Route One to this bridgehead and hold it. We went up there early in
14 the morning. Well, we were on amtraks—armored personnel carriers, not amtraks. We
15 rode up the highway to the bridge.

16 KC: Is this the O'khe River?

17 DP: Let's see, 13th May, North Vietnamese Army forces in the enemy-held Hai
18 Lang District of Quang Tri Province. No, that's not it. I'd have to dig up the citation. But
19 anyway, we went up and we stopped short of the bridge. Because we were running low
20 on fuel, I advised the battalion commander to have all the armored personnel carriers shut
21 down and so they did. We were sitting there and it was fairly quiet and I heard a tank
22 crank up just like I'd heard before up out near Firebase Jane and do a neutral steer and
23 shut down. I told the battalion commander that I think there's going to be a tank ambush
24 on the north side of the bridge. I started adjusting naval gunfire into that area where I
25 heard the tank noise. Of course, there was an observer on the other side and he started
26 adjusting fire on the other side and he started adjusting fire with 130 guns on us on the
27 south bank. It became a duel between forward observers. It lasted about an hour.

28 I remembered that just north of this bridge, there was a triangular-shaped outpost
29 that had been built by the French. It had been occupied by Regional and Popular Forces.
30 My curiosity had caused me to stop there one day and look at this triangular-shaped, very

1 heavy concrete fort. I was interested in the firing ports and the way that it was laid out. It
2 was typical French military engineering.

3 Well, we were able to drive the forward observer off from the north bank, he quit
4 shooting at us. We decided to go ahead and cross the bridge. We got across the bridge
5 and we started taking fire from this triangular-shaped outpost. I called Bob Sheridan and I
6 said, "I think there's Ruff Puffs inside that fort that are shooting at us, at the Marines." So
7 Sheridan told Colonel Chung what I had said and Colonel Chung said, "Popular Forces
8 do not shoot at Marines. Please tell Price to destroy that outpost." So I had an aerial
9 observer right above me. I told him, I said, "Man, have I got a target for you." I said, "Do
10 you see that triangular-shaped outpost just north of about fifteen hundred meters north of
11 the burning bridge?" He said, "Yeah." And I said, "Blow it away." And he said, "Okay,
12 give me your last four and your initials." Meaning my last four digits of my serial number
13 and my initials. He said, "Roger that." And it just so happened that he had an AC-130
14 gunship coming on station, an Air Force gunship. He's got the 20-millimeter Gatling gun
15 and the 105 howitzer. It was a Spectre gunship. Here it is, early in the morning and
16 there's a regiment of NVA holed up inside and around this outpost. So the gunship hoses
17 the fort down with the 105 and the 20 millimeter. Then right behind, it becomes a fighter
18 aircraft with a Mark 82 high explosive bomb, a napalm bomb. The NVA are trapped
19 inside of there and some are trying to get out. I'm just running wave after wave of air on
20 them. Later, and I'm kind of ashamed of this, but my buddy said that I had done a "shake-
21 and-bake" sequence on the NVA.

22 KC: Meaning what?

23 DP: We killed—I looked at the carnage, but I didn't have the stomach for it. I was
24 later told that there were 234 dead NVA on the ground and around that fort. So we pulled
25 back down, the battalion came back down to the My Chanh because Colonel Chung was
26 so happy and the Vietnamese are still coming across that bridge exodus. Before I
27 destroyed that fort, the NVA had held back thousands of refugees on the road. But once
28 the fort was destroyed, they had no choice, but to let them go.

29 Now, about this time, Andy DeBona comes up with the 7th Battalion and it was
30 attached to Brigade 369. Colonel Chung sends—and this was the next day. Colonel
31 Chung sent the 7th Battalion up the same road to occupy the same bridge that we had

1 taken the day before. DeBona won't say anything. He's very closed mouthed so away
2 they went up the road. I started thinking, I turned to Sheridan and I said, "Bob, Andy
3 shouldn't be in the field. He's only got two weeks left until he goes home."

4 KC: He's very short at that time.

5 DP: Usually they pull them out at thirty days, but Andy wouldn't say anything.
6 He had only two weeks left in the field and he wanted to go back to Saigon and get all
7 your shit squared away and get your shots and do a little shopping and so on. He said,
8 "Donny, go get him right now." I jumped in a Jeep, no driver, I grabbed a weapon and
9 away I went up the road. There was the 7th Battalion, in column going up the road. I
10 drove up next to the command element. There was Andy and I said, "You're time's up.
11 You can get in the Jeep You're going home." He said, "No, I want to go on." I said, "God
12 dammit, Andy, Bob Sheridan told me to come and get you and I'm not going back down
13 there without you in this Jeep. Now get in the damn Jeep." So he did and he said, "I
14 wondered when somebody was going to realize that my time was up in the field." So he
15 got in the Jeep and we went back down to the My Chanh to where we were staying down
16 there in the village. We'd been back there about a half an hour and we get a call from the
17 7th Battalion that a 130 barrage had just hit the 7th Battalion's command element and the
18 battalion commander had been killed. So if Andy still had been with that battalion, then
19 he could have possibly been killed or wounded or who knows. Bob Sheridan and I pulled
20 him out of the field just in time.

21 KC: Amazing. Now, after Quang Tri has been abandoned, you're facing these
22 refugees leaving Quang Tri coming down Highway One, you're still there at the My
23 Chanh, correct?

24 DP: Right.

25 KC: Pick up the story there. Tell me what you do as Quang Tri is being
26 abandoned. And you're holding the south bank of the My Chanh River.

27 DP: Well, they decided to have a counter-offensive operation. This took place on
28 the 13th of May. Here again, I was with—they put me with the 3rd Battalion at that time
29 because John Ripley had gone home. That had been his battalion. We had a Marine
30 special landing force that was floating off the coast. They had been authorized to give the
31 Vietnamese Marines the direct assistance in the form of helicopter lifts. So they landed

1 down at Camp Evans which was still secure. The 3rd Battalion got aboard the choppers
2 and we flew over the My Chanh and we dropped in right behind—we dropped right in the
3 middle of the enemy in the Hai Lang District.

4 As we were landing, the chopper I was on got hit in the tail boom by an RPG-7, I
5 think, I don't know. The chopper crashed. Everybody got off, nobody was hurt, and the
6 U.S. Marine air crew was picked up by another chopper and there set this CH-53 out
7 there in the middle of the rice paddy. I'd never forget about the tail number, it was
8 Yankee Tango 22. So the problem was, what are we going to do with this helicopter?
9 You know, it's a multimillion dollar helicopter, but here we are behind enemy lines. So I
10 called Sheridan and I said that about the only alternative we have here is to destroy it. He
11 said, "I agree, but I'm going to have to go up the chain." And he did and he came back
12 and said, "Go ahead and destroy it, but go ahead and make sure all the weapons and
13 classified material have been removed before you do that." So I went back out to the
14 chopper and looked around inside and the U.S. Marines, the crew had taken everything.
15 They had taken their radios and maps. I didn't see anything really classified so I came
16 back and I got some Vietnamese Marines who had some LAAWs, light anti-tank assault
17 weapons. We fired a couple rounds into the CH-53. It's got a lot of magnesium in it and it
18 had a lot of fuel on it, too and away it went. It burned up right there. I had to sign a one-
19 page statement about how the helicopter crashed and I had destroyed it. They said that the
20 squadron commander was sick at heart that they had lost this CH-53. But that was the
21 way it went. That was on May 13, 1972.

22 Then we went on another operation behind the lines, but we went much closer to
23 the beach. Another helicopter-borne assault and when we landed, I could hear some firing
24 going on. They weren't firing at us, but it was the first time I had ever heard a North
25 Vietnamese tank fire. It had a real cracking high velocity sound to it. So I adjusted some
26 naval gunfire there. By this time, we really had the advantage because they were within
27 our naval gunfire fan and we could adjust on them.

28 Walter Boomer was there with another battalion. He landed further north than we
29 did. Also, we had a reporter, an Englishman came with us on this raid. This guy wore
30 some type of British camouflage uniform and he had cameras and everything. I told him,
31 I said, "Buddy, you better stick close to me because you never know what's going to

1 happen out here. Stick close to me.” So he didn’t. He wandered off and started taking
2 pictures by himself. I went and got him once. “You must stay with me. You must stay
3 near the battalion commander.” Well, here again he wanders off. Meanwhile, the
4 choppers are coming back into pick us up and I’m wondering where this Englishman is. I
5 tell the battalion commander and then I tell the flight leader that there’s an English
6 reporter down here that I can’t find. Basically, it was tough shit, we’re leaving. We did
7 and we left him behind. About a couple months later, we start getting reports of a dead
8 Caucasian near the beach about three kilometers north of where we had left him. We said,
9 “Well, how do you know it is a Caucasian, number one?” He said, “Well, he has blonde
10 hair, curly blonde hair.” We persistently were getting this report from refugees who had
11 been walking down the beach about this American body up there. Oh, so I thought, “It
12 was probably this Englishman.”

13 That area by then was pretty secure because we were headed back north and so I
14 got a squad of Marines together and a couple of Jeeps and we went up there and sure
15 enough, there were his remains beside the road. His wrists had been tied behind his back
16 with communications wire. So I had the Vietnamese load up his remains and what was
17 left of him in a C-ration box. We ran a routine medevac the next time we could and sent
18 his remains down to Da Nang. Long story short, we later learned that he was a British
19 Royal Marine commando who had gone AWOL in Hong Kong and became a stringer,
20 became a pressman and that he lived in Saigon and he had a Vietnamese girlfriend down
21 there. He was AWOL and he was dead, that’s for sure, but I told him, “Stick with me;
22 stick beside us.”

23 KC: Take me through the process by which the South Vietnamese Marines retook
24 Quang Tri.

25 DP: I can’t address that because I wasn’t there. I left in September and that was
26 not on my watch. You could talk to, oh, I’d have to think of some of the guys that were
27 still there, but I can’t recall right now. But there was another action about a week later.
28 On the 22nd of May, we were at the Brigade 369 headquarters. We had moved north of
29 the My Chanh River. I had been moved to be at the brigade level. I was Major Sheridan’s
30 assistant at that point. I was no longer out with the battalion. I had been pulled in.
31 Because I had been sick, I had lost a lot of weight. I had the human round worms, Ascaris

1 Lubricoides I couldn't hear very well because when I was wounded, a guy behind me had
2 stepped on a mine.

3 Anyway, we were in this bunker, and I always volunteered to take the last radio
4 watch. That usually is at about 4 A.M to 8 A.M or 6 A.M. I would get up and fix myself a
5 little cup of coffee and monitor the radios and listening to what's going on and getting
6 ready for the day. I checked the map to see what the Vietnamese are doing and so on.
7 Anyway, we get a call, I get a call from a Ranger battalion advisor and he's north of us
8 and he says that there are tanks moving through his position, through the Ranger's
9 position with their lights on. I said, "Go ahead and engage them." The guy said, "Well,
10 we don't have any LAAWs." Then I lost radio contact with him. I didn't know if the guy
11 had been—I didn't know if this report was true or not. Maybe it was just somebody,
12 maybe even an NVA calling up to jerk our chain because they did that from time to time.
13 Anyway, a little bit later I start hearing these whirring sounds. I could hear tanks and
14 they were coming. I got everybody up and I said, "There's tanks coming. There's tanks
15 north of our position." You know, "Reveille, reveille. Up and at 'em. There are tanks
16 north of our position."

17 Well, we had gotten a tube-launched optically-sited wire-guided missile system
18 (TOW). We had had one lecture about it and there was an Army sergeant there from Fort
19 Knox. He had brought this and he was the head of the mobile training team that brought
20 the TOW . We said, "Well, where should we put this TOW?" And Bob Sheridan said,
21 "Let's put it on top of our command bunker. Around the command bunker were antennas
22 and the antennas were held aloft with suspension wires, guy wires that went down. These
23 were two-niner-two (292) antennas. So I thought we were in a safe position. If Bob wants
24 the TOW on top of the bunker, that's where it's going to go. So we got some Vietnamese
25 to take the thing apart and put it up there and put it back together. Well, the firing starts
26 and we have a 105 artillery battery inside the wire with us. Now, this is the brigade
27 command post. Here comes the tanks. The Vietnamese Marine artillerymen, just like
28 they were trained to do, they lowered the muzzles on the 105s and started firing flat
29 trajectory fire at the tanks. The sun is just coming up and here comes the NVA tanks. It
30 must have been a squadron of them.

1 Well, Sheridan is on the radio and he's trying to get close air support and they
2 were too close to us to call naval gun fire because it's just really hazardous when you're
3 in that close. If we could get gunships, that would be a different thing. So Sheridan's
4 trying to get gunships and he says to me, "Donny, do you know how that TOW works up
5 there?" And I said, "We only had one class." He said, "I don't care. Get up there and
6 shoot that thing." So I climbed up on top of the bunker and there's about a million rounds
7 flying around. I tell the sergeant, "Come on up here, you're going to shoot this." He's
8 scared to death and I'm standing behind him and there's a tank coming straight toward
9 our bunker. It's about, two-hundred meters away and the TOW has a terrible back blast to
10 it. There were some Vietnamese who were curious as to what we were doing and they
11 were standing behind the back blast, behind the bunker and I'm yelling at them to get the
12 hell out of there. I could see the tank. I got the binoculars up and I could see the tank
13 coming. This poor sergeant is just shaking like a leaf and I said, "Can you see the tank
14 through the optic?" "Yes." "Can you hit the tank?" "Yes." "Are you ready to engage the
15 tank?" "Yes." And I said, "Fire the TOW." So he fired the TOW and the damn thing went
16 out and it's got like a Garcia spinning reel, it's got the wires hooked to the rear of it. It
17 went out and it clipped one of the guy wires on the antenna. So this guy, he was very
18 experienced when it came to shooting it. He tracked the tracker back up, reacquired the
19 TOW and then adjusted it and it just came like a curve ball right back and hit that tank
20 and blew the turret right off of it. It turned out that that was a command tank and just by
21 destroying that tank, that halted that attack. When he got back to Fort Knox he got a
22 Silver Star.

23 KC: Is that right?

24 DP: Yeah, and Bob Sheridan said, "Well, I'll give you a warm handshake, Don."
25 That's all I got.

26 KC: What did you think of the TOW's capability?

27 DP: I thought it was great. And then I stayed up on top of that bunker for a couple
28 hours shooting the TOW.

29 KC: Really?

30 DP: Yeah, and we were picking out targets of opportunity and we saw this big
31 tree line move and the more I studied the tree line, I could see an antenna. This thing was

1 about a thousand meters away and we fired the TOW just into that tree line. We got a
2 huge secondary explosion. Then it did a—I think it was called a BMP or a resupply track
3 vehicle that the NVA had out there. Yeah, after that everybody wanted a TOW. First,
4 nobody wanted one because it's so damn big and heavy. You know, it sits on a big tripod
5 and it's almost like an artillery piece.

6 KC: It always struck me as it being a cool weapon. Just the way that it operates.

7 DP: Yeah, you've got to know how to operate it, of course. Tube-launched
8 optically-sighted, wire-guided missile system.

9 KC: All right, we had you here in the Quang Tri Province in May. How much
10 longer are you going to spend in Quang Tri with the Marines up there?

11 DP: Well, about this time Colonel Dorsey, he was down at the Citadel in Quang
12 Tri or in Hue City. He called me down there and he said, "I'm pulling you out of the
13 field." He said, "There's so many things happening here, I want you to write awards for
14 all these things that are happening."

15 KC: Why did they choose you for this?

16 DP: Pardon?

17 KC: Why did he choose you for this?

18 DP: Because I was an English major and he had seen some of my after-action
19 reports. He had seen examples of my writing. Plus I was very hard of hearing. I was sick,
20 and I needed to come out of the field anyway to gain some weight, and it's pretty damn
21 hard to say no to a colonel, so. He set me up in a Connex box with a little desk in there
22 and there was a generator and a reading lamp, a yellow legal pad, and a bunch of pencils.
23 There I sat for about three weeks writing awards. Almost all of the awards that the
24 advisors got during that period of time, I wrote them.

25 KC: That must have been quite a snapshot of what you saw there and what
26 everyone else was doing.

27 DP: Yeah, and because I had been there and the experiences that I had gone
28 through were similar to the experiences that my friends had gone through and were going
29 through, I was able to write them up fairly quickly and accurately and honestly,
30 intellectually honestly as possible. Whenever the award didn't stick at Fleet Marine Force

1 Pacific, if the awards board downgraded the award, I felt badly about it, but I'd always
2 try to give it my best shot.

3 KC: You spent three weeks doing this, you say?

4 DP: I think about three weeks. We were right in the heart of the Citadel. The
5 building that we were in was the, oh, the—it wasn't the palace, but it's where the
6 concubines lived. The house of the concubines. I have since gone back there and visited
7 it. When we were there, there was no one inside the Citadel. It was really kind of an eerie
8 place. Then after I finished all the awards writing I went back up to Brigade 369 and
9 there was not much going on after that, to be honest. I didn't participate in any other
10 significant actions. There was nothing like before.

11 By that time, the North Vietnamese had essentially given up on the idea of taking
12 Hue City. That was their real objective. However, they had gained a province and they
13 had captured a province capital and that had put them in a very good bargaining position
14 that impaired the so-called peace negotiations. Of course, the Vietnamese Marines went
15 back up and retook Quang Tri Town and Quang Tri Citadel which was kind of their Iwo
16 Jima. As I said, I was not there when that happened. I left in, oh, I left on September 11,
17 1972. I was on—this is from a citation. The 5th Marine Battalion and "participated in
18 nineteen major combat operations. And evacuated wounded personnel, coordinated
19 resupply on the mountain top outpost along the DMZ. Helped organize and orderly
20 retreat are the Vietnamese Marines out of Quang Tri Province." So it's just kind of a
21 plain vanilla end of tour citations.

22 KC: A moment ago you used the phrase, "so-called peace talks in Paris." Were
23 you paying attention? Did you have the time to pay attention to the diplomatic aspects of
24 this, of what was going on at the higher government levels?

25 DP: Yeah, to a certain extent because when I was writing the awards down in the
26 Citadel, we had quite a number of reporters that passed through. They wanted to talk.
27 The big talk was Vietnamization and whether or not Vietnamization will work and
28 whether or not the Vietnamese could fight. So Colonel Dorsey would always bring me in
29 whenever he was being interviewed by a reporter. I remember one in particular was
30 Stuart Alsop. You may remember him. He had a brother, I can't remember him.

31 KC: Joseph?

1 DP: T. And then Peter Arnett came through, Horst Faas, the German
2 photographer and several others. The most notable one was Stuart Alsop. Also, we were
3 getting the *Stars and Stripes* up from Saigon and my mother was sending me magazines
4 and newspaper clippings and so on. I read everything we could get ahold of. I was, you
5 know, then at night I would listen to Hanoi Hannah and heard what she had to say. Some
6 of it was really comical. There was another guy on that Hanoi station satellite, Peter
7 Lorre. He was kind of funny to listen to. Whatever Hannah said, you could turn it 180
8 and pretty much figure out what was going on.

9 KC: What was going on, do you recall?

10 DP: She was making a big deal out of the fact that the 56th ARVN Regiment had
11 surrendered at Camp Carroll. The commanding officer of the regiment had now been
12 welcomed into the people's arms. Also, that they had captured Quang Tri. They were
13 doing a lot of bragging about shooting down U.S. aircraft. She talked about the
14 negotiations and how, oh, that Nixon was a mad man and that Kissinger was his lackey
15 and President Thieu was a puppet. He talked about the fighting at Pleiku and An Loc
16 and about the stalemate in the peace talks at Paris "because of the perfidious nature of
17 American statesmen" and "they do not want to face the inevitable" and things like that.

18 KC: Right, what was your impression of the peace talks? From what you could
19 gather from various different sources?

20 DP: Well, I went back—when I was working for General Burchinal in Stuttgart,
21 he went to Paris. He took me with him. He went to talk to one of the generals at the Paris
22 peace talks. It turned out there was an Army general there by the name of Weyand, a tall
23 red-headed guy. He had been in Vietnam and he was kind of the military leader of the
24 staff of the Paris peace talks. So General Burchinal told him that I had just come from
25 Vietnam before coming to work for him. Although, I had been at school in Quantico for
26 six months. Weyand wanted to see me right away. I must have talked to him for a whole
27 afternoon. He wanted to know especially about—and that was much earlier. That was
28 before the '72 offensive. That was right after the Tet Offensive. He was particularly
29 interested in the security in the countryside. He thought, and so did I, that if the peasant
30 feels secure in his village and can attend church and harvest his rice and takes care of his
31 family, he doesn't really much care who's in power in Saigon. So it always seemed to me

1 that the security in the countryside was pivotal to the outcome of the war. That was a very
2 good session with General Weyand. I learned quite a bit from him because of his take on
3 the situation. I think I already told you about the number of thatched roofs and the
4 number of tile roofs that I'd see in the countryside when I'd fly around. And the more
5 tile roofs I saw, that indicated to me that whoever owned that hooch had enough
6 confidence in the government to keep it from getting blown away. There was really not
7 much time for politics. That came later. Of course, when you look back on it and then
8 with the, oh, when the Pentagon Papers came out, that was very revealing and it was also
9 hurtful because the guy who did it had been a Marine lieutenant before. So I can't say
10 much else about that, about the politics of it. Of course, we had been taught all along that
11 we were not political creatures as Marines. That's something for others to do. Of course,
12 they encouraged us to vote, but beyond that, be apolitical.

13 KC: As your time in Vietnam winds down, how did you feel about progress of the
14 war? You've been there and this is your third time there. What did you think about the
15 progress of the war?

16 DP: I thought that Vietnam would survive on the model of South Korea. What
17 was most disappointing is when we started to cut off the ammunition for them to fight
18 with. That, to me, was one of the major mistakes not to continue the wherewithal to
19 defend themselves. But at the same time, I've seen how just absolutely corrupt Saigon
20 was and the millions of dollars that had gone down rat holes. But still, I thought that
21 based on the way the Vietnamese fought in '72 and the fact that they were able to hold on
22 to An Loc and Pleiku, and they would not take Hue City, I thought that they had really
23 broken the back of the North Vietnamese and that there would be relative peace for a
24 number of years before the North Vietnamese would try another offensive like that. Of
25 course, I was wrong, as everything went to hell in '75.

26 KC: So we're approaching September of 1972. You know that you've got this
27 time, this date that you're going to go home. As you prepared, not just preparing your
28 things to gather to go home and you're out processing, how do you prepare yourself
29 mentally for leaving this incredibly challenging and incredibly exhilarating and
30 dangerous existence as an advisor in Vietnam?

1 DP: Well, actually I talked to Colonel Dorsey about extending for six months like
2 I had done before. Of course, he would have to approve of that and he said, "I don't know
3 about that." He said, "We're going to cut way back on the number of advisors that we
4 need. We're no longer going to have field advisors. We're going to have logistics
5 advisors. They don't need field advisors anymore. We're going to have a few fire support
6 coordination officers. We're going to continue to send the ANGLICO teams out with
7 them. The days of the battalion advisor are over." Then, I got orders to the Naval
8 Academy. Dorsey called me in and he was a Naval Academy graduate and he said, "This
9 is a feather, you better go."

10 KC: Did you apply for this?

11 DP: No, I didn't. It was just out of the blue. Plus, my mom was putting pressure
12 on me to come home because my brother was in Thailand, he was in the Air Force at that
13 time. So she had two boys in Southeast Asia. Colonel Dorsey says, "I'm going to make it
14 plain, you're not staying here. You're going to the Naval Academy. I'm going to come
15 see you at the Naval Academy and I want you to invite me to a football game." I said,
16 "Ay-ay, sir. I'm out of here." So I was gone. I really looked forward to going to the Naval
17 Academy. Of course, I never went there before. I was very curious to see what it was all
18 about. I looked up to quite a number of Marine officers that I knew that had gone to the
19 Naval Academy to include Bill Keys. By then, the Marines had fought their way back in
20 to Quang Tri province. I think they seized the Citadel just about the time I left. I can't
21 remember exactly what the day was. They had gotten back up there. I wanted to get home
22 and gain some weight, number one, because I was really down. I had amoebic dysentery
23 and a couple of other things, worms. I just felt run down and worn out. Not unlike most
24 of the other guys.

25 KC: What was the first thing you wanted to do when you got home?

26 DP: Eat some Mexican food.

27 KC: I bet, being from Arizona, I bet.

28 DP: Drink some Coors beer and play some pool, and eat some Mexican food.

29 KC: That sounds pretty good right now, as a matter of fact.

30 DP: Yeah, so it was easy gratification, easy to come by.

1 KC: What was it like when you came back home in September of 1972? I asked
2 you this before, but on each successive tour I would imagine American society has
3 changed between the time you leave and the time you come back. What was it like to
4 come back in '72?

5 DP: Well, one of the things I did is I went to see Billy Uren in San Francisco, the
6 guy who had lost his leg. By then, he was a practicing attorney, and he had finished law
7 school and he and his family were doing just great. We talked, you know, it's a funny
8 thing. You can't talk—at least I couldn't talk to anybody unless they had been there.
9 There was no one in Flagstaff that had been to Vietnam that I knew of. The guys I felt
10 sorry for were the ones that were in the jungle and the next thing, they are on an airplane
11 to Travis Air Force Base and then they're home. I don't know, in Davenport, Iowa,
12 whaerever. No one can relate to them and most guys don't want to talk about what
13 they've gone through. So, they don't have any real support group. They're family to a
14 certain extent, but their family wasn't there either. The thing about a career Marine is that
15 you always had the support group, they were there and it was considered in bad form to
16 talk about anything that you had done that had gotten an award for or any particular, oh,
17 hairy situation that you'd been in. Everybody had been in it so we didn't talk about the
18 war except in very few instances, but if a guy was feeling down or he's having marriage
19 problems or whatever, there were always a lot of brother Marines there to close in and
20 support him. So we did not have the transition problems that a lot of returning veterans
21 had.

22 KC: What about changes in American society? Did you notice any? Did the
23 country seem any different when you got back this time?

24 DP: Well, yeah the sexual mores had changed. The women's liberation had come
25 and stayed. The hippie movement was dying. The society appeared to me to be much
26 more open. The black people had made good progress, I thought. Even though the
27 economy was in a slump, Nixon was not yet in trouble at that point when I got back.

28 I really fell right in with the midshipmen. I liked them, and I enjoyed teaching
29 them. The dean of instruction was an Air Force colonel and he called me into his office
30 when I reported in. He said that, "I see your college transcript here and I know you're
31 supposed to go to the leadership department, but I was wondering if you would go to the

1 English department because we now have women faculty members and most of those
2 women faculty members are in the English and History Division. We don't have enough
3 of them in Math, and Oceanography, and Hull Design, and Propulsion, and Electrical
4 Engineering, and so on." So, what he was really telling me, and he didn't use these
5 words, the English and History Division had become the de facto dumping ground for
6 women's lib. He wanted some guy who had been in combat, in the field, to go teach
7 poetry to midshipmen. So I said, "Sure, I'm here to serve. I'll do anything you want." I
8 ended up with midshipmen—I taught Remedial English. Most of my students were
9 minorities and athletes. The name of the course was Rhetoric and Discourse, but the
10 midshipmen called it Sesame Street.

11 KC: What did you think about teaching this course?

12 DP: About what?

13 KC: About teaching this course?

14 DP: I enjoyed it because the midshipmen were really—they would really try.
15 They tried hard; they gave us their best. They wanted to stay there. It was tough enough
16 for them to get in. Especially as a minority, they had a tremendous amount of pressure
17 from home to graduate from the Naval Academy which was really a feather for them. So
18 I never had any problems with any midshipmen.

19 All the time I was there I only put two on report and these guys were between
20 their junior and senior year. When they go, they go on a cruise, but in that summer. They
21 keep what is called a "cruise log." Then when they come back, they just take all those
22 cruise logs and throw them in cardboard boxes and bring them over to the English
23 department and hand them out to the instructors to be graded. Well, I lived right there on
24 the campus. I lived in a BOQ which was right on top of the officers' club. I was about one
25 block from Samson Hall where the English department was. I'd take these themes, these
26 cruise logs, and I wouldn't assign any grades to them, I would just go through and read
27 all of them and mark them up. Then I would lay them on the floor of the BOQ room and
28 I'd say, "Okay, this is an A, these are Bs, these are Cs. I didn't give Ds or Es. If it was
29 bad, I'd give an F. The kid wasn't trying. None of those kids are C or D students, but
30 they'd just quit or they'd give up or something. I thought that all midshipman were at
31 least a C average. Anyway, I'm reading this one theme and I said, "Damn, didn't I read

1 this before?" I kept on reading and I came across the same mistakes, and I went over and
2 I started looking through the ones I already read and, lo and behold, there were
3 duplicates. One midshipman had copied off the other midshipmen. So I called them over
4 to my office and I showed them the papers. I said, "What am I supposed to do about you
5 two?" As the conversation went on, they had been aboard the same ship, they had been in
6 the same compartment, they had used the same desk, and that one guy had obviously
7 copied off the other guy. Well, this one guy was from New York. He was in the running
8 to be a Rhodes Scholar, he was engaged, and he was going to get married at the chapel.
9 The invitations had been sent out, the dresses and all that stuff. He had bought a new
10 Corvette.

11 The other guy was just barely making it through. He was going to be a Marine, a
12 very religious kid. So, I told them both, "Get out of my office." The religious kid came
13 back with his Bible and he put it on my desk and he swore on the Bible right in front of
14 me that he did not copy." And I said, "I believe you, but what am I going to do now?"

15 So, I asked for examples of writing from both of the midshipmen. There's a thing,
16 it's an old technique called the "fog index" that you can run on prose and you can count
17 the number of words in a sentence and then you pick you the number of words of Latin
18 origin, the number of words of Anglo-Saxon origin and then you run them into a formula
19 and you can determine at what level that paper is written at. Is it at the post-graduate level
20 or is it at the seventh-grade level? I don't know if you're familiar with that, Doctor.

21 KC: No, I'm not.

22 DP: Anyway, I did this fog count on the papers. Well, the paper was written at
23 about the sophomore high school level. It was written by the Marine because the Rhodes
24 Scholar guy was writing at the PhD level.

25 KC: Is that right?

26 DP: Much better. So they have a midshipmen court martial. Midshipmen are
27 really tough on each other. They hold a court martial in the middle of the night and it's up
28 in the bowels of Bancroft Hall. You're sworn and it's like a real court martial. You've got
29 people representing both of them and to make a long story short, I pulled out these papers
30 and I showed them how this fog count works and I said, "There's no doubt in my mind

1 that this paper, this cruise log was written by Midshipman so and so and not Midshipman
2 such and such. And they agreed. So they found him guilty of plagiarism.

3 KC: Oh, wow.

4 DP: Well, next thing I know, I start getting calls from this kid's parents saying
5 that I'm trying to ruin his career and that I'm a hard ass Marine. I don't know what I'm
6 doing and I shouldn't even be in the English department and so on. Then I get a call from
7 a representative Sam Stratton's office from New York. This is the guy that appointed this
8 Rhodes Scholar kid to the Naval Academy. And some staffer i trying to lean on me.
9 Finally, I just had enough and I told him to go fuck himself, and I didn't know who he
10 was and that if he wanted to talk to me, come see me face-to-face. So then I went up and I
11 told this Navy captain that I worked for, everything that had gone on. He said, "Come
12 with me." And we go over to the dean, the Air Force colonel. I tell him the same thing
13 and the dean says, "Come with me." We go in to see the superintendent, Admiral Mac,
14 real nice old man. I tell him what's going on. He says, "You don't take any calls from
15 anybody. You tell them to call my office." And so I did. I talked to the admiral and he
16 said for you to call him.

17 Anyway, this guy, because the Rhodes Scholar guy had gone past his junior year,
18 when he got kicked out of the Naval Academy, he still owed the United States Navy two
19 years of service. So he went out on active duty as a seaman. I don't think he should
20 include that in this monologue. I don't think it's very relevant.

21 KC: Very interesting.

22 DP: Now, how long were you there at the Naval Academy?

23 KC: I was there for three years.

24 DP: And you taught English the entire time?

25 KC: Yes, I taught English. I started a Marine Corps newsletter while I was there. I
26 sponsored the debating society. I helped with the thespian society, the Masqueraders. Oh,
27 I just enjoyed teaching English basically. Then some of my friends showed up at the
28 academy. Walter Boomer was there, Richard Hodory, he was also an advisor. Herb
29 Pierpan_, a Navy Cross recipient that was there. Our mission was to get midshipmen to
30 join the Marine Corps. The chief of naval operations and the commandant of Marine
31 Corps had signed an agreement that if the Marines would provide 16 and two-thirds

1 percent of the faculty with Marines with master's degrees to serve with the faculty, then
2 16 and two thirds percent of each graduating class could be commissioned as Marine
3 second lieutenants. What that equates to, of course, if you have a graduating class of a
4 thousand, that would be 162 Marines, plus or minus. That number of Marines serves as
5 the cornerstone of that particular year group of officers. If you don't get that 160, that
6 means that the other recruiting officers off in the field have to double up their efforts
7 because the highest retention of officers is from the Naval Academy. If you lose one
8 regular officer, you've got to get five reserve officers in hopes that one will go regular to
9 take that Naval Academy graduate's place. You see what I mean? So, the first year I was
10 there, the Navy made a tactical mistake and they said, "Before you can go to Pensacola to
11 flight school, you had to go to sea for a year." Well, the Marines said, "No, we've got
12 cockpits available. You can go straight to Pensacola. You don't have to go to sea for a
13 year." So we met our quota and then some. Well, the next year, the Navy didn't do that.
14 We didn't meet our quota because we were so self-confident. The senior Marine got fired
15 and they brought in a new Marine named Marc Moore who took over. He took over the
16 English and History Division so I became his de facto executive officer for Marine
17 affairs. So we had to put together a Marine recruiting program which kept us very busy.
18 We were able to make our quota the following year. Colonel Moore made brigadier
19 general and retired as a major general. He lives in San Diego now.

20 So aside from teaching English, there was a lot going on as far as recruiting
21 regular officers out of the Naval Academy. One of the interesting things that happened is
22 the brigade commander, the most high ranking midshipmen was a football player. A good
23 looking guy, All-American. He was number one in the class. They sign up in Memorial
24 Hall and the midshipmen come down this long staircase based on their class standing.
25 And then they go over to the table that they want to sign up. They want to sign up for
26 surface line, nuclear power, supply, JAG Corps, Marines, whatever they want to do. And
27 so the first guy coming down, he gets his choice. He goes over and signs up. The last one
28 that comes down, maybe he's number 1,030 in the class. He gets what's left over because
29 a lot of the quotas have already been filled and he doesn't have much choice as to what
30 he gets. Well, this All-American comes down and the admiral's there and he's watching.
31 All the faculty officers and the senior Navy captains are watching where he's going to

1 go. He hadn't said a word. He walks right over to the Marine Corps table, signs up, takes
2 off his blouse, and underneath his blouse, he's got a red T-shirt on that says, U.S. Marine
3 Corps. He revealed this T-shirt to everybody like Tarzan. He beats on his chest and he
4 goes, "Oorah , come onto the Marine Corps, mids." I thought the admiral (??). Anyway,
5 it was a good time.

6 KC: It seems like a strange, and maybe it didn't to you, but to someone who saw
7 the action and someone who had three tours in all these different ways, to be teaching
8 poetry, like you said, to midshipmen in Annapolis, what was it like for you to go from a
9 real life blood and guts Marine, as it were, to being on the academic faculty teaching
10 poetry and English?

11 DP: It would just seem like a part of an adventure that I was on. It was just
12 amazing. Incidentally Tom Draude was there at the same time.

13 KC: Is that right?

14 DP: Yeah, he was the disciplinary officer. He worked for the commandant of the
15 brigade, a very high-pressure job. He and I came even closer to that time when we were
16 there at the Naval Academy. I couldn't believe it. I'd wake up on top of the officers' club
17 and several times I was a senior officer in the BOQ there and we had the last closed mess
18 in the Navy. It was manned by Filipinos, Filipino stewards. I'd been in the Philippines, to
19 jungle warfare training there and so on. I got along great with the Filipino stewards. So it
20 was like three years of R&R actually.

21 KC: What was the state of the U.S. military? Obviously you were in the service
22 early on, but you did see the Army and the Marines?

23 DP: Well, at that time, you know, the Russians were still the major threat. The
24 strategic arms and limitations were going on. The Navy was on extended deployments. It
25 wasn't unusual for an aircraft carrier to be gone six months. As a result, the quality of life
26 in the Navy was down and there were lots of divorces. There was a saying in the Navy at
27 that time, "He made lieutenant commander and got his divorce." So the Navy was losing
28 people, too. Guys were not reenlisting because there were contractors in towns such as
29 San Diego and Norfolk who would hire an ex-Navy guy with technical skills to work on
30 the ships when they came back in the port for twice as much money as the guy that was
31 making on active duty. So that was a problem. The Marine Corps had—and this was no

1 secret, they had racial and drug problems. They had this problem with sickle-cell anemia
2 where the black face would break out and doctors would say that they didn't have to
3 shave. So you'd see some Marine with a beard. So, we got a new commandant, Lewis
4 Wilson who said, "If you can't shave, that's a medical condition. We will discharge them
5 within sixty days." Also, he instituted what they called the Expeditious Discharge
6 Program." If you've got a guy that's always in trouble, got a bad attitude, you can just
7 write it up like a report on this guy's activity and forward it and he's expeditiously
8 discharged from the Marine Corps. We just don't need you anymore.

9 Another thing was, going back to the basic marksmanship, drills, personal
10 appearance, haircut, shined shoes, impeccable uniforms, emphasis on learning, taking
11 courses through Marine Corps Institute. There was also a lot of emphasis on getting the
12 best we could from the recruiting commands. I think we were the first to say that we were
13 going to take only high school graduates. So that put tremendous pressure on the
14 recruiters. Before that, sometimes the recruiting command and the training command
15 were at two different camps. So, the recruiters, they would recruit some kid who weighs
16 250 pounds and he can't do one pull up. He gets to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot and
17 he can't do anything. He can't train. He's not Marine material. Well, the recruiter says, "I
18 sent you a body." Yeah, and the training command goes, "Yeah, look what you sent us."
19 So, General Wilson pulls the recruiting command and the training command under one
20 hat. So what you recruit, you've got to train. So that helped a lot. There was just a general
21 house cleaning and returning to the roots at that time. The Army had a similar problem
22 that was more pronounced than ours was. They went through the same thing. Of course,
23 Watergate started and as President Ford said, when he stepped up "our long national
24 nightmare has come to an end." So that was very demoralizing that our commander in
25 chief was in all that trouble.

26 Of course, his aide was my friend, Jack Brennan, and he was right there when all
27 that was going on. We used to meet him over—there was an Irish pub over in D.C. called
28 Matt Kane's and we would meet him there and talk about what's going on. There was
29 quite a number of Marines who hung out at Matt Kane's. I told you we were there on the
30 day Martin Luther King was killed.

1 KC: I believe it was General Lewis said something to the effect, “I’ll clean out the
2 Marine Corps if it means there’s just myself and a lance corporal.” He’s really going to
3 take it back to the roots. He wasn’t going to put up with the nonsense that would be
4 allowed to develop. He was going to take the Marine Corps back to the tradition
5 foundations of discipline and order.

6 DP: Right, and of course he was from Mississippi. He was very good friends with
7 Senator Stennis and he had a lot of political clout. He had the Medal of Honor from
8 Guam and tense blue eyes, hair trigger temper, and they called him the Blue-eyed Cobra.
9 He was a very determined man. He was the right man, at the right place, at the right time.

10 KC: Why don’t we stop there for today, Colonel?

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Interview with Don Price
Session [9] of [9]

Date: 19 January 2010

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4 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager continuing an oral history interview with
5 Colonel Don Price. Today is January 19, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, on the campus of
6 Texas Tech University. Colonel Price is joining me by telephone from his home in Sierra
7 Vista, Arizona. Colonel, you wanted today to talk about your time back over across the
8 Pacific Ocean there. Your time in Japan and more specifically, your time dealing with
9 refugees from Vietnam. Rescuing Vietnamese refugees in the Gulf of Siam at the time
10 from Thai pirates. Can you tell me how you came to be in that position before we move
11 onto actual events of that time?

12 Donald Price: Well, after the academy I went to the Marine Corps Command and
13 Staff College and subsequently I was at 29 Palms, California, and then I went to National
14 War College. Then I went to Okinawa where I was a battalion commander infantry.
15 Traditionally, the battalion goal, what they call a float, and go aboard ship and go to
16 various places like Korea for a reinforcement exercise and to the Philippines for jungle
17 warfare training, to Japan for cold weather training, to Thailand for the reinforcement
18 exercise there.

19 At that time, I was on Okinawa and we deployed aboard ship and we went to, oh,
20 first we went to the Philippines to Subic Bay. I paid a call on the chief of staff of the
21 naval base there and it turned out I had known him from Vietnam from the Rung Sat
22 Special Zone when he had been a lieutenant commander at that time and now he was a
23 senior Navy captain. I walk into his office and he said, "You're just the man I've been
24 looking for." He showed me a message that authorized the use of deadly force against
25 Thai pirates and the direct action against Thai pirates. They didn't name them
26 specifically, but to humanitarian endeavors on the high seas. This had come from the
27 secretary. It came from CINC Pac, Commander and Chief, but it had been initiated by
28 Mr. John Lehman who was the Secretary of the Navy at that time and the Regan
29 administration had just come into power. Now, before that, when Carter was in power,
30 the Vice President Mondale took a great interest in the plight of the boat people, but the

1 Navy had said they were not in the humanitarian business and they drug their heels and
2 they didn't want to get involved in it. Lehman, a very forceful individual said yes and
3 would get involve and try to rescue some of the boat people.

4 KC: When are we looking at here?

5 DP: This is like 1981.

6 KC: Okay.

7 DP: I'm going to be purposely vague in some areas because I don't know if this
8 information is still classified or not.

9 KC: Sure, that's no problem.

10 DP: Anyway, the chief of staff said, "We've got two Vietnamese boats that
11 people have tried to escape on. We've overhauled them and gone through their engines
12 and we've installed radios in them and we want to turn them into decoy boats." He said,
13 "We've got about fifteen volunteers, all males, with military backgrounds who are
14 willing to man these decoy boats." They got these Vietnamese out of a place called
15 Morong, which is on Bataan. It's just south of the Subic Bay Naval Base. It's about a
16 two-hour drive. It's just north of the Bataan nuclear power plant. This refugee camp had
17 been established by the United Nation commissioner for refugees. At that time, it held
18 about eighteen thousand people there. Families, kids, women, children, anybody who had
19 been able to make it to the Philippines from Vietnam.

20 I said, "Okay, let me think about this, Chief. First I'd like to talk to the
21 Vietnamese and then I'd like to look at the boats and see what they can do." I said, "But
22 this sounds like a job for the SEALs." He said, "The SEALs are busy right now. We've
23 got to get something done here." So I went and talked to the Vietnamese. They'd been
24 put in a barracks up at Cubi Point which is not right at—it's an adjacent naval airbase, but
25 they'd been kind of isolated up there. So I went up to talk to them and it turns out there
26 was a Vietnamese Marine that I knew from Vietnam. He had escaped from Vietnam as a
27 boat person. He had organized these guys and he had Vietnamese SEALs, Vietnamese
28 Airborne, Vietnamese Rangers, and he had a couple more Vietnamese Marines. These
29 were all combat veterans. They had revenge in their heart. They had volunteered for this
30 program.

1 I looked at this and I said, “Well, I think we need somebody who speaks English,
2 Thai, and Vietnamese also.” He agreed and within a couple of days we had a women in
3 the camp who had been a school teacher. An older lady, and she had also been raped by
4 the Thai pirates when she escaped from Vietnam. I went back to the chief and I said, “I
5 think we can do this, but these Vietnamese need some training first. Plus, we’re going to
6 need some equipment.”

7 So, we took them over across the Subic Bay to an area called Zambales . We had
8 them trained with M-60 machineguns, M-16 rifles, and LAAWs. Which is an acronym
9 for light anti-tank assault weapon. It’s a 60-millimeter bazooka, if you will. It expands and
10 the tube is made out of fiberglass. You fire one round and then you just throw the tube
11 away. Then we got the boats out and we trained in the boats. They came up with various
12 ways to hide beneath bamboo reeds and burlap. There were hiding places on the boats,
13 there were radios on the boats, and we gave them flares, both a parachute flare and
14 meteor ???-type flares, concussion grenades, thermite grenades, the M-60 machineguns,
15 the M-26 grenades, signal mirrors, oh, sea marker dye. Life vests were hidden aboard the
16 two boats, but the exterior of the boats remained the same, but just like they’d come from
17 Vietnam. We were also able to get some mannequins ins. We had black pajamas made in
18 the town of Olongopo and we got wigs. The men shaved very closely and they appeared
19 to be women. We put the translator, the woman, we tried to hide her as much as possible
20 and protect her so that she could talk on the radio.

21 Then, about this time, the goddamn lawyers got involved. They wanted to come
22 up with some rules of engagement. I said, “Well, the rules of engagement are clear that
23 we’re to engage them with deadly force.” Then there was a big to-do about whether or
24 not we could fly a distress flag aboard the decoy boat. Then they got into the territorial
25 waters of Thailand. The territorial waters of all nations go to the low-tide mark out twelve
26 nautical miles. That’s the territorial waters. There’s another thing called contiguous
27 waters which goes for another twelve miles beyond that. Well, Thailand claimed that
28 their contiguous waters went out twenty-four miles beyond that so that put it out to thirty-
29 six nautical miles. Then they claimed the entire Gulf of Siam (??) or Gulf of Thailand to
30 be their maritime economy area. Essentially they said they owned the Gulf of Thailand.

31 Well, this went back and forth and I went to the chief of staff and I said, “You

1 know, first you tell me we've got to get on with this and now the lawyers are fighting
2 over each other with this. We've got to go; we've got to get something done."

3 KC: Were these Navy lawyers?

4 DP: Yeah, Navy lawyers and young guys. And so finally they sent a Navy captain
5 and a very experienced lawyer from Hawaii who was an expert in maritime law. He
6 straightened it out and we couldn't display the flag because that was deceptive. The
7 distress flag which is a checker blue and white. We could engage if the pirates ts
8 displayed a weapon such as a machete or a gun, especially a sub-machinegun. If they
9 made a verbal threat, if they fired at the boat, or if they gave an illegal order such as stop.
10 They had no right to stop you on the high seas. We were going to pretend to be dead in
11 the water anyway.

12 We finally got that sorted out and we loaded the Vietnamese and the two boats
13 aboard a landing ship dock and we steamed into the Gulf of Thailand. In the meantime, I
14 equipped four amphibious tractors. One was a command-and-control tractor. I put the
15 battalion operations officer in there. A major along with a Navy lieutenant from the ship
16 and several radio operators and maps, signal equipment, and so on. Second amtrak, we
17 equipped it like an ambulance. There was a doctor and there were corpsmen and they
18 were ready to do a battle triage and take care of casualties. In the third tractor we put a
19 squad of Marines and these were shooters. This was the security force. And then on the
20 fourth tractor we put food and water in case we came across a Vietnamese boat--boat
21 people. We were able to provide them with food and water right away.

22 We didn't tell anybody anything until we got out on the—until we were
23 underway, until we got away from the port. The Marines, I had to get all first-class
24 swimmers because I was afraid that some of them would end up in the water, they had to
25 be first-class swimmers. Also, they had to be volunteers. That was easy because there
26 was about eleven hundred men in the battalion to include corpsmen.

27 KC: How many volunteers did you need?

28 DP: I wanted just one rifle squad, thirteen. That would be the shooters. Then
29 within the command-and-control group, there were five. So there were about eighteen
30 and then there were three. There was also the amtrak crews and each of the four amtraks
31 had a crew and then I put one fire team on the food and water boat for protection. I think

1 the total number were the Marines in the four amtraks was something on the order of
2 thirty.

3 KC: Okay.

4 DP: We steamed in and the Gulf of Thailand. If you look at a map of Thailand,
5 Thailand wraps clear around the gulf and goes from Cambodia clear around to Myanmar,
6 which used to be Burma then all the way down to, oh, Malaysia. The gulf is big, but
7 when you really look at it, it's very confining. Thailand, the northern part of Thailand is
8 parallel with Hanoi how far north it goes. The southern part of Thailand is South of
9 Vietnam. It's kind of like West Virginia the way it's all spread out.

10 Then we had to do some practice. We practiced along the way and basically, what
11 we would do is we would spill the four amtraks out. The landing ship dock, the way it
12 works is they've got the well deck. The well deck is flooded and then the stern doors are
13 opened and the tracks can go out. They just float right out of the rear end of the ship. So I
14 put the amtraks in the water and continued to steam on a given heading. Then we would
15 let the decoy boat out and the decoy boat had to be out of sight of the four amtraks. Then
16 we would continue on in the LSD until the LSD was out of eyesight of the decoy boat.

17 Depending on the height of your eyeball or binoculars, if you're on an aircraft
18 carrier up on a bridge, you can see a long way. If you're in the water, you can't see that
19 far. The distances involved in sight are the function of where the eyeball is in relationship
20 toward the water. That was a consideration we always had to keep in mind so that we
21 were over the horizon. We couldn't see each other, but we could communicate with each
22 other. The idea was that the Thai pirates would approach the decoy boat and once they
23 made their hostile move, then the Vietnamese came out of the gunwales and revealed
24 themselves. The Vietnamese were organized into two fire teams of four men apiece. You
25 had the fire team leader, a machinegunner, an assistant machinegunner, and a
26 rifleman/grenade thrower. Then you had a squad over of these two fire teams and then the
27 woman translator was also involved. She had an electronic megaphone so that she could
28 give commands.

29 These pirates came out of the area in really southern Thailand called Son Ca La.
30 A lot of them were Muslim and a lot of them were Malay. They attacked the boats with
31 old French weapons. They did have some AK-47s. They wore sarongs and headbands.

1 Mostly they intimidated people with machetes and hammers. They were absolutely
2 vicious. The Vietnamese were helpless because from 1975 on, it was very difficult to get
3 a weapon, especially if you were suspected by the government of trying to escape or
4 being a member of a former regime as either the military or part of the government. Also,
5 the boats that they used, for the most part, were designed for inland waterways or just
6 offshore. They weren't designed to traverse the Gulf of Thailand. They weren't designed
7 to go on the high seas. So they were not very seaworthy. By the time the Vietnamese got
8 into the area, they had been at sea for maybe sixty days. They were dehydrated, they were
9 tired, and they were malnourished. They were demoralized so they were very vulnerable
10 and easy targets. What the Vietnamese had done is they had sold everything they could
11 and tried to get gold, and they did successfully carry gold with them or hard currency or
12 either U.S. greenbacks. The Thai pirates knew this. The Thai pirates, a lot of them, were
13 fisherman. There were literally thousands of these boats out there in the Gulf of Thailand.
14 You couldn't really tell who was a legitimate fisherman or who was a pirate or who was a
15 fisherman acting as a pirate. When the pirates attacked or when they came alongside, the
16 thing was, we wanted to open fire first because we wanted the surprise effect. Open fire
17 with the M-60 machineguns and throw concussion grenades onto the deck of the Thai
18 boats. I didn't want them to use fragmentation grenades because the fragmentation was
19 liable to come back and hit our people in our boats. Incidentally, the Vietnamese called
20 themselves Cac Ssau, which means crocodile in Vietnamese. Most of the sailors called
21 them the Cobra boats. No one was really sure what these boats were for until after we had
22 been out there for a while. The first time we engaged, and I wasn't there. I wasn't on the
23 scene, I was back on the LSD. The pirate boat pulled alongside and said, "Send over your
24 women." The shooter stood up and opened fire. They threw the concussion grenades. The
25 women with the loud hailer told them to turn off their engine because we wanted them to
26 stay there. We wanted them to stay put. We also knew that they had radios and they
27 would be calling, asking for help, and telling whoever that they had been attacked by
28 Vietnamese refugees. The most deadly weapon, or most effective weapon that the
29 shooters had was the LAAW, the one with anti-tank assault weapons and you could fire
30 that into the side of the pirate's boat, put a big hole in it and it immediately starts taking
31 on water. The Thai pirates said they were so shocked by this that they immediately gave

1 up. Now, when that happened the Vietnamese were instructed to fire. We could hear the
2 firing on the LSD. The Marines in the amtraks could hear it very clearly. At the
3 prearranged signal that they had made contact was a green star cluster that they would
4 fire into the air. And so the LSD and the four amtraks would head toward the green star
5 cluster. Sometimes, though, the damn pirate boat was still under power and would try to
6 get underway and get away from our decoy boat. The instructions were just, "Let them
7 go." Usually, after firing a couple LAAWs into them and repeatedly telling them to turn
8 off their engine, they would stop. Then we would come up in the amtraks and open fire
9 with a 50-caliber machinegun and rake down the Thai pirate boat and then ram it and sink
10 it. Then the LSD would show up and we would shepherd the decoy boat back into the well
11 deck and then the amtraks would come aboard and we would leave. The translator, the
12 woman with the loud hailer would tell them that there were pirates in the water and we
13 left them and told them if they're rescued, to tell their friends, "This is what's going to
14 happen to you if you attack another Vietnamese boat under these circumstances." We
15 were out there for about a month. One of the things that happened that we had planned
16 for, but we didn't expect the numbers that we got, we were picking up Vietnamese boat
17 people. We were bringing them aboard the ship. They had to set up like a tent city on the
18 helicopter landing zone on the ship. A lot of those people were malnourished; they had to
19 be fed. Some of them had malaria. The big thing was, and this is what the ship's doctor
20 was concerned about, is some of them had tuberculosis. So, this was a great concern to
21 the captain that he didn't want his crew to contract tuberculosis. He told me, he said, this
22 is cutting right into my mission readiness. We can't keep all these people aboard here.
23 Then one of the pregnant women gave birth to a little boy. I told her to name the little boy
24 after the captain. He was really a very good man, a Catholic, and when he learned that the
25 little boy was named after him, of course, he bonded with the kid, but then that was
26 another emotional problem that I gave him through the back door. We were out there
27 almost a month and finally we were ordered back to Subic Bay to offload all of these
28 refugees. By that time, the SEALs were available. We offloaded the refugees at Subic
29 Bay and then they were taken by truck convoy down to Morang to the United Nations
30 refugee camp. That's basically what happened. The SEALs then, took over the mission. I
31 was able to talk to some SEALs years later at Coronado Island. That's where the home of

1 their special warfare is. There's a bar there where all the SEALs hang out called
2 MacPee's . I ran into a couple old SEALs there and I asked them if I every operated in the
3 Gulf of Thailand trying to rescue Vietnamese boat people. They were reluctant to talk
4 about it. Finally, this one guy had told me he had taken over the mission, but they had
5 used a submarine. They had used the ridged rating craft, those rubber assault boats that
6 they used. They did it a different way. They didn't go into detail, but he said one of the
7 first things he did was—and I got the impression that the SEALs themselves were on the
8 decoy boat and once the decoy boat had been engaged, SEALs would go off to the side
9 into the water and attach a mine to the Thai pirates' s boat and blow a hole in the bottom
10 and just sink it right there. But that was about all I could get out of this guy. The battalion
11 and the task force got a—everybody got a Humanitarian Service Medal, but that was
12 about it. It was very close hold. The operation didn't even have a name it was so close
13 hold. Mostly it was done by word of mouth. I'll stop there if you've got any questions,
14 Kelly.

15 KC: Well, yeah, I don't want to ask any questions because you said you don't
16 know if it's been declassified yet or not. Now, you were out here for about a month in the
17 gulf, is that what you said?

18 DP: Yeah.

19 KC: How many times did you send these boats out? How many times did you
20 engage these pirates?

21 DP: We engaged nine times and we sank nine boats and I'd estimate we killed at
22 least over a hundred Thai pirates. The longer we stayed out, the less piracy we saw.

23 KC: Sure.

24 DP: And so it really put a dent in it. I don't have the statistics or anything about
25 that about acts of piracy, but I was told by the chief of staff that there had been a dramatic
26 drop of piracy in the Gulf of Thailand. Another thing we did is we would repaint the
27 boats in the well deck. You know, they had the eyes on the front of them and the teeth
28 and we would paint them various colors so they would think there was more than one
29 boat. They thought that there were multiple boats out there that were capable of
30 defending themselves.

31 KC: Did you go out on any of these missions yourself?

1 DP: Can you speak up just a little bit?

2 KC: I'm sorry, did you go out on any of these missions yourself?

3 DP: No, I did not. But I supervised. I just didn't think it was appropriate for me to
4 be out there because, you know, I had had my war and I wanted my troops to have as
5 much action as possible. I wanted them to see that they could do it on their own without
6 somebody looking over their shoulder. Also, I rotated as many Marines through there to
7 do that as possible. They were just absolutely clamoring to go out. So it was really a good
8 thing. It was humanitarian and it's an unwritten rule, a mariners' rule that if someone's in
9 distress, you tried to take care of them. We certainly did that. It turned out that the most
10 viscous of the shooters was the woman. She was an absolute tigress. She'd get that loud
11 hailer in one hand and the M-16 in the other hand. She was terrifying.

12 KC: I'll be darned. Now, the Marines were of course the III Corps Marines. Is that
13 correct?

14 DP: Pardon?

15 KC: The Marines that you were in charge of your battalion, III Corps Marines?

16 DP: I'd rather not say.

17 KC: Okay, right. Now, were there any American casualties that you know of?

18 DP: No, none. And that was one of the things that I told the lawyers. I said, "You
19 can write all the rules of engagement you want, but my first priority is to protect the lives
20 of my Marines and the corpsmen, American lives." That was the number one protection,
21 no.

22 KC: Were there any Vietnamese who were killed or injured?

23 DP: Yes, and they were taken care of in the boat or in the amtrak. We had two
24 seriously hurt or wounded, but we had a contingency or that. We had Vietnamese in
25 backup that were very willing to come right in and move into their slots. The element of
26 surprise, it was just absolutely overwhelming to the Thai pirates. When we really looked
27 at them, they weren't that well-armed. They were very intimidating, especially with the
28 machetes. Mostly they had old French rifles, junk equipment, and they were used to
29 picking on women. Rape was rampant. They would beat people up, throw them over the
30 side, stab them, they'd shoot them. It was just awful the atrocities they committed against
31 the Vietnamese. They would attack a boat once and they would come back and they

1 would attack it again. Some boats were attacked three times. The women and the kids
2 were absolutely traumatized after they'd gone through this.

3 KC: What type of boats would they man? The pirates?

4 DP: They were-fishing boats which were larger. The Vietnamese boats on the
5 average were about thirty feet long. The Thai boats, they ran up to forty, fifty feet. A lot
6 of them were diesel powered and they were commercial fishing boats. They have the nets
7 and everything. That was one of the reasons why it was difficult to get them to stop. We
8 let them steam off. There was no way we could stop them, but they went back and they
9 told what they had run into which was good psychologically. They had the bullet holes on
10 their boats and penetrations from the LAAW rockets to prove it. The captain of the ship,
11 when we started getting the Vietnamese refugees, the board, he said, "What am I
12 supposed to tell the Thai Navy if they pull up alongside be with all these Vietnamese
13 aboard? Tell them you're on a humanitarian mission. But, we had to do it in daylight for
14 safety's sake. I had a forward air controller in the control amtrak and there was air on
15 station, but we wanted them over the horizon and we didn't want them obvious that we
16 could get air support if we needed it. In order to keep the operation as safe as possible, we
17 never did use air, not even a helicopter. It was all done on the surface.

18 KC: Sure. Well, how could you be sure that you were able to find and engage
19 some of these pirates without some sort of air reconnaissance?

20 DP: We had aerial photographs of the area. This was on the trade routes that we
21 were on that ran out of Bangkok down to Malaysia. So we knew where to go. The Navy
22 had been studying this problem since 1975 when Vietnam fell. So they knew where they
23 were. Most of the pirate boats came out of the town of Song Khla, which is in the
24 southernmost part of Thailand, right across from the Mekong Delta. You go straight
25 across and you go right across the mouth of the Gulf of Thailand.

26 KC: Now, what went through your head when you first heard that you could be
27 involved in leading this effort against the pirates? Given the time you spent with
28 Vietnamese citizens and Vietnamese civilians while you were there as an advisor. What
29 did it mean to you to get this new duty to be able to go out? I don't want to say exact
30 revenge, that's the wrong connotation, but to be able to provide a little bit of justice, at
31 least in this way??

1 DP: At first I was reluctant because this was not my mission. But then after I
2 talked to the Vietnamese, especially the Vietnamese Marines and then we went down and
3 visited the camp at Morong, I could really see that there was a need to do something to
4 stop the Thai pirates. I was really not that aware of the situation and how bad it was. But
5 you go into the camp where there's 18,000 survivors who had been boat people and you
6 don't know the number that didn't make it. You can see that this was a humanitarian
7 tragedy of major proportions, like a genocide that was going out there. Mr. Lehman was
8 bound and determined to do something about it and he did. That was with President
9 Reagan's permission. I don't know how much the president knew about it. I'm sure he
10 was briefed. We didn't call them after action reports, but we did a lot of reporting on
11 what happened. But they were pretty much brevity reports engaged at such and such. The
12 Navy took care of all of that reporting. The Navy wanted to look good. They wanted to
13 show the secretary that they were doing something about the pirates. I later learned when
14 they said the SEALs were busy, and I can't be exact on this, but the SEALs had been sent
15 into Laos to check out the caves where American POWs that had been left behind were
16 still being held. I don't know if you remember all that.

17 KC: Yes.

18 DP: So when the SEALs came back—and there were never that many SEALs
19 over there at Subic Bay. Certainly you'd get more out of San Diego. The SEALs were
20 anxious to take that mission. As to how much longer that would last, I don't know.

21 KC: Now, you have been involved in a variety of different missions and a variety
22 of different ways, doing a variety of different things within the Marine Corps. Whether
23 it's with a staff officer or it's someone leading troops in combat or as an advisor. This
24 mission was drastically different from anything you had done before.

25 DP: Yeah.

26 KC: Did you find this to be a daunting task thrust upon you at all?

27 DP: Not really, to me it was a small ambush operation. The only difference
28 between the ambush on the land and ambush on the sea was the water because it was
29 basically an ambush, as I said. All of the ambush planning was already there embedded
30 on my C- drive so it was very easy to put the operation together. It was not without
31 hazard when you drop four amtraks out there and then put the decoy boat out. There are

1 lives involved, but at the same time, there are other lives to be saved, too. Everybody who
2 participated in it was very enthusiastic about it; they really wanted to do it. There was no
3 reluctance on the part of anyone, especially the Vietnamese to take part in this.

4 KC: Did you find this particular mission to be fulfilling or rewarding?

5 DP: Yeah, in retrospect it was. One of the great things was all the Marines in the
6 battalion got a medal. Whether or not they had been out on the amtraks or not. The troops
7 were just elated about that. We were supposedly going to be put in for a Navy
8 Commendation or something, but nothing ever came of that. The troops all got the
9 Humanitarian Service Medal so that was great that they got that. Then, ironically, the
10 ship, we went to Thailand. I was afraid that the Marines would brag about it when they
11 went on liberty at Pattaya Beach. We emphasized that they weren't supposed to say a
12 word about it no matter how proud they would have been of it. They kept their mouths
13 shut. I was very proud of them. We didn't have any leakage at all when we went to
14 Thailand. Then we went on an operation in Thailand with the Thai Marine Corps. We
15 were side by side with them out in the countryside. The Thai people were very kind to us.
16 They would give us cigarettes and bananas and tea and fresh fruit. Another thing was,
17 every hooch_ we went by in the countryside, inside there was a very conspicuous picture
18 of the king. They really loved their king. So it was a good operation that we had with the
19 Thai Marines and it was good liberty at Pattaya Beach for my Marines. Of course,
20 Pattaya Beach is clear on the other side of the Gulf of Siam from Song Khla and different
21 situations.

22 KC: Right, right. Of course, you're dealing with non-governmental actors dealing
23 with pirates, obviously.

24 DP: Yeah, and then quite a number of the pirates were Muslim. Of course, what
25 factored into all of this was the age-old animosity between Thailand and Vietnam. I
26 wouldn't call them mortal enemies, but they certainly are enemies. Not as much as the
27 Vietnamese view the Chinese as enemies, but there's a lot of cross-cultural tension there
28 between the Thais and the Vietnamese.

29 KC: Now, while you were there in Thailand working with the Thai Marines, was
30 there any discussion with the pirates and what they were doing?

1 DP: No, none. That subject was completely off limits. The Thai Marines
2 reminded me a lot of the Vietnamese Marines. The way they operated and wore a very
3 similar camouflage-type uniform and I felt like I was back with the Vietnamese Marines.
4 Of course, the Vietnamese Marines at that point were history.

5 KC: Right, right. It's certainly very interesting and somewhat fitting in the time
6 you spent in Vietnam and at almost different capacities, to be involved in a humanitarian
7 effort like this, which is what will often time happen at the ends of wars is that there a lot
8 of kinds of these loose ends that involve people's lives that people will just kind of forget
9 about. "Oh, were not going to worry about this." But there is this element of lawlessness.
10 There is this element of uncertainty and a lot of people get caught up in this sort of thing
11 to be there to add that kind of cap and that kind of finality to the American experience
12 there. The way it seemed, I don't want to put words in your mouth, but I would think it
13 would seem somewhat gratifying.

14 DP: Yeah, it was, but thinking about it, the Thai pirates, these were targets of
15 opportunity. The real problem lay with the new Vietnamese government that caused this
16 exodus. Hanoi was responsible for this. The people would not have fled if the new
17 government had been kinder and more benevolent. They caused the exodus out of their
18 country. They were not all Vietnamese. Some of them, some of the refugees were
19 Chinese who lived in Vietnam and they had left when they wanted out. When the lawyers
20 were all involved in this and trying to come up with rules of engagement, I would sit in
21 on these sessions as long as I could stand it and I told them, these are not swashbuckling
22 pirates that you think of that run up the Jolly Roger and have some degree of gallantry
23 about them. These are thugs and murderers and rapists who are committing crimes on the
24 high seas. They're not just taking the booty or taking the ship, they are perpetrating
25 crimes that are just brutal sadistic, animalistic. So you're not dealing with what would be
26 called a stereotypical pirate, you know, Black Beard or Captain Blood or something like
27 this. It's a different situation. Thailand has had a long history of piracy. We were back
28 into the early 1800s.

29 KC: All right, now when you finish your time here, you've come back to the
30 states. When did you come back to the States?

1 DP: Oh, I came back in '82 and I went to headquarters Marine Corps. I stayed in
2 the D.C. area for, oh, I think six years. That was the end of it. I ended up basically as a
3 staff officer and then I was on the faculty of the National War College. I was the
4 department chairman there at the War College and then I ended up, my last tour of duty I
5 ran the military postal service to deliver mail overseas. They were having difficulty
6 getting the mail into the Gulf Region. General Al Gray said, "Well, what you need is a
7 Marine to deliver the mail. We guarded the mail in the 1930s, we can deliver the mail."
8 General Powell said, "Put up or shut up, Al." The next thing I know, I get a call from
9 General Al Gray's office from the aide and he said, "General Gray wants to talk to you."
10 "Do you know what it's about?" And he said, "I think it has to do with the post office." I
11 said, "The post office? What in the hell?" I had been a stamp collector all the time I was
12 in the Marine Corps and quite a number of guys knew that to include General Gray. He
13 gets on the phone and he says, "Donnie, pack your bag. I want you to take over the
14 Military Postal Service and get the mail to the troops. This is especially critical because
15 Christmas is coming up." I said, "Sir, I don't know anything about the mail." He said,
16 "Well, you collect stamps, that's enough. Now go ahead." So I went over to the Military
17 Postal Service and I was there for a year, but that was another interesting thing that I
18 found. There were drugs in the Military Postal Service coming through Panama through
19 the U.S. Army base down there and being shipped up to New York City. That's another
20 story. I finished out there. At the end, I spent almost 34 years on active duty.

21 KC: Now, I understand if you don't want to go into these other positions that you
22 held. Some of the information that I have written down on the background shows that you
23 career was quite distinguished. You run through it pretty quickly, kind of like in an "Aw,
24 shucks" manner. There were a lot of positions that you held that were very impressive,
25 Colonel. I understand, if you don't care to go into this. That's perfectly fine.

26 DP: I relieved one guy and another guy relieved me so I always was lucky. I
27 always got to work with very good people. I still stay in contact with a lot of them today.
28 Of course, we're in our seventies now and a lot of them are dying. The leaves are starting
29 to fall. Looking back, it was very fulfilling. It was great to work with good people and I
30 did some interesting things. I have no regrets.

1 KC: Okay, I just have very few more questions for you, Colonel. These relate
2 back to your time in Vietnam. As you look back on it, as you look back at all your
3 experiences in Vietnam and in Southeast Asia, what do you think you learned about
4 yourself the most?

5 DP: Well, that's a tough question and it's a good question. This may sound kind
6 of phony, but I had done a genealogical research up my family tree prior to 1800s. I was
7 surprised to learn that it's not the pasture, it's the stallions. Just about every other
8 generation my direct line of male descendants was preacher, teacher, soldier, preacher,
9 teacher, soldier, or combinations of thereof. Coming from Scots Irish background, I had
10 ancestors that had fought in the Indian Wars, in the Revolutionary War, War of 1812, the
11 Civil War, Spanish American War, World War I, World War II. It seemed that I was
12 predestined to be involved in conflict. I guess the genes were all there; they were all lined
13 up that I can do what I did in combat. Jim Webb wrote a book called *Born Fighting* about
14 the Scots Irish. The fact that as a subculture, we were always engaged in combat. That
15 gave me some insight as to why I kept going back. Of course, growing up in northern
16 Arizona I had a fly rod in one hand and a rifle in the other. I had grown up around
17 stockmen and cowboys and construction guys and men of few words, but very serious
18 people if you infringe upon their rights or their honor or their family. I don't know if
19 that's a good answer to your question.

20 KC: That's great.

21 DP: It's a tough question.

22 KC: Well, when you look back at the war in Vietnam from America's
23 perspective, from the perspective of the country as a whole and everything that Vietnam
24 meant to the United States, what lessons should be learned from Vietnam? We spent all
25 the time talking about lessons in Vietnam for this. You were there in several capacities,
26 what do you think in Vietnam, what were the lessons that you should take?

27 DP: The biggest lesson to me was, "Let the commanders in the field fight how
28 they want to fight." I remember at one point Lyndon Johnson bragged that we could not
29 bomb an outhouse in North Vietnam without his permission. Well, that was good for his
30 ego, but it was tough for the planners and the commanders. There were a couple of
31 squadrons of MIGs that were stationed at an airport in North Vietnam that were off

1 limits; we couldn't hit them. We couldn't go over and cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We
2 couldn't do amphibious landing north of the DMZ. Penetrate and go in and then come
3 back out. If it would have been up to me—another thing is, is the Marines ended up in I
4 Corps, and I think I've said this before. We should have been down in the Mekong Delta
5 with the U.S. Navy riding those ships. The Army should have been up south of the DMZ
6 which, in some areas, was ideal tank country. Instead of us being down, we should have
7 switched places. I think that our commanders would have done that, but of course, the
8 Vietnamese knew how to manipulate the press at home; they were masters at it. Their
9 strategy of fight, talk, fight, talk worked. Another thing was that Vietnam--North
10 Vietnam--was one of the only nation to take a census during that time of their population
11 and did a demographic study of their population. I think what they did is once they had
12 done this census, they did an analysis and determined how many men they could send
13 south each year and still sustain the economy in the north and procreate the race. So
14 basically they matched bodies against our technological firepower and our one-year tour
15 syndromes and our lack of will in the D.C. area. The war in Vietnam was not lost on the
16 battlefield over there. I don't have to tell you that it was lost back here on the streets of
17 the U.S. and on the campuses and in the classrooms and in the press.

18 KC: One last question for you, Colonel, and feel free to interpret this in whatever
19 way you choose and to answer it as broadly or as narrowly as you'd like. Another one of
20 the things that we're going to look back at in five years from now, twenty years from
21 now, fifty years from now, whatever, is going to be, what is the ultimate legacy of the
22 Vietnam War? Particularly for the United States.

23 DP: That's another good question. To me, it was a crusade. Now, we had nothing
24 of national interest there. We didn't need their rice, we didn't need their oil, and we
25 didn't need their manpower. We did nothing for them. A small nation, yes, there were
26 fourteen million people, but we decided to help them as long as they were willing to
27 fight, we would fight alongside of them. In one way, we helped bring down the Soviet
28 Union in my opinion because of all the weapons and support that the Soviet Union had to
29 put into North Vietnam. It was a huge strain on the Soviets' economy and helped bring
30 the Soviet Union to an end. It was a crusade, but it was a lost crusade. I've gone back to
31 Vietnam twice, gone across the old battlefields and visited Saigon, Da Nang, Hue City,

1 Hanoi. The people are much better off than when we were there. Their infant mortality
2 rate is down, their per capita income is up. Their literacy rate is up. All of the positive
3 indicators of a healthy society are there. The economy is booming. We left them in very
4 good shape with a seaport at Cam Ranh Bay. We dredged the bay at Da Nang and turned
5 it into a good port facility. We left good port facility outside of Saigon, Saigon port. We
6 left airfields that were some of the best in the world at one point. Bien Hoa was the
7 busiest airport in the world. Of course, Vietnam is located between the two most
8 populated nations in the world. India on the one hand and China on the other. They have
9 vast natural resources that they weren't able to tap into during the war. That includes
10 timber, there's offshore drilling that's going on. You have a very good work force. The
11 Vietnamese, smart people, easily adaptable, have great eye motor skills, and will work
12 really hard for you. So, all these things combined. Of course, when the Soviet Union did
13 collapse, they could no longer send money to Vietnam to prop up the economy. All the
14 old hardliners were dying and the new members of the politburo saw that they had to
15 make some type of major change in order to survive. That's why they adopted a form of
16 capitalism and free enterprise under a benevolent socialist government. That's what you
17 have there at this time. They opened the door to foreign investment. The Australians were
18 some of the first to go. They towed a hotel on a barge from Grand Barrier Reef clear up
19 the river in Saigon. That was one of the first thing the Aussies did when they went back
20 in. Of course, they had fought there, but they were not reluctant to see that they could
21 make some money. Singapore, a lot of investment out in Singapore into Vietnam. It's not
22 like the economic miracle of Germany after the Second World War, but it certainly made
23 a comeback. There's healthy indicators that you wouldn't think you would ever be in
24 Vietnam such as Vietnamese stock market. When I was over there, everybody was riding
25 motorcycles or everybody was riding bicycles and a few people had motor scooters.
26 Now, everybody is on a motor scooter. Seldom you'd see bicycles. Everybody is wearing
27 crash helmets. If you want to buy a car, you'd have to pay a hundred percent tax on that
28 car because the Vietnamese government does not want their people to transition to
29 automobiles because areas like Hanoi and Saigon would come to a gridlock. The
30 transportation system just couldn't handle it if they were all in cars instead of on motor
31 scooters. When I was there, you could go from Saigon to Bien Hoa and that as like going

1 from one city to another. There was rice paddies alongside the road and so on. Now, it's
2 completely built up. You can't tell you're going from one city to another. We went up to
3 I Corps and went out to Khe Sanh. We were on parts of the Ho Chi Minh Trail which are
4 paved now. Khe Sanh was like in no-man's land. It's very well populated. All of the
5 Montagnard villages out there have a rural electrification. They all have lights. The
6 Montagnard villagers, the hooches that they live in which are elevated off the ground, all
7 have satellite dishes. An example of the technological change that we're going through is
8 I saw an old Montagnard man wearing a loin cloth. That's all he had on. He had this
9 gray, bushy hair and he was squatted beside the road and he was talking on his cell
10 phone.

11 KC: That's quite a contrast.

12 DP: Yeah, it's just absolutely incongruous that here this old guy who probably
13 seen the French is talking probably to his grandchildren on his cell phone. There are
14 internet cafes out near the border, oh, where the first tank attack came, Lang Vei, clear
15 out on Route 9, up near the Cambodian border. That's where the PT-76s attacked, the
16 first introduction of armor into Vietnam. That was during the Siege at Khe Sanh. Lang
17 Vei was nothing. Now, it's a thriving little town on Route 9 which runs into Laos. The
18 DMZ area is—I wouldn't call it the Garden of Eden, but its lush tropical area with
19 banana trees. There's fields of corn growing, I'd never seen that before, pineapple fields.
20 Everything has come back to life. The coffee bean, the coffee trees out in Khe Sanh in
21 that valley out there, they're growing again. The railroad, Kelly, from Saigon to Hanoi, is
22 running again. The Vietnamese had policed up everything that we had left behind. All the
23 shells, the bullets, the casings, the wire, the concertina, the concertina stakes. Anything
24 that they could and they melted it down and they sold it to China. So now the toys that
25 you buy from China for Christmas, that's the metal that we sent over there in the form of
26 weapons. I went from Saigon, Ho Chi Minh City, down through the Rung Sat Special
27 Zone out to Vung Tau. I led the trip. I had ten Americans with me. We rode on a Russian
28 hydro- plane from Saigon through the Rung Sat swamp to Vung Tao. Unbelievable, all
29 the defoliation you can't tell that that area had ever been defoliated. Lots of river traffic.
30 At Vung Tao, there was an Army airfield there that has been leased by a consortium or
31 oil companies. There are brand new helicopters lined up there at that old Army airfield

1 that take off, that take oil workers out to the derricks, to the oil stations offshore of Vung
2 Tau. We went up to this observation hill, to this old French lighthouse and looked out on
3 the South China Sea. As far as you could see, there are oil tankers sitting out there. They
4 are riding high out of the water because they are not full. The only oil tankers that are
5 moving, that are underway are riding low in the water because they're full of oil. So this
6 is kind of a snapshot of where Vietnam is today. One of the questions that the
7 Vietnamese asks us, and I'm still fairly fluent in Vietnamese. I got one of those Rosetta
8 Stone kits and I practiced my Vietnamese for three months before I went back over there
9 the first time. One of the first things they ask you, "Are you a Russian?" And if you say,
10 "No, I am an American." They say, "Oh good, Americans, we like Americans. We don't
11 like the Russians." So they welcome you. The war to them is ancient history. We were
12 able to spend a day with a former Viet Cong commander. All he wanted to talk about was
13 his grandkids. He didn't care to talk about the war, but I was able to draw him out about
14 the war. I said, "What weapon did you fear the worst that we had?" He said, "Well, the
15 weapon that you did not deploy." I said, "What do you mean?" and he said, "First, you
16 use teargas. Then you used Agent Orange. The next logical step for the Americans would
17 have been poison gas, but you never used the poison gas." I said, "Well, what about the
18 B-52s?" He said, "Oh, no problem. We had your maps and we knew that your planners
19 would not plot a B-52 strike within a thousand meters of a church. So we knew where all
20 the churches were on your maps. If we were near a church, if we used that as our base
21 camp, we knew the B-52s would not be allowed to strike in that area. Of course, we
22 would go out of that area on operations, but we would always come back and find safe
23 haven near the church." He said, "As you know, most of the churches had fallen down;
24 they weren't occupied." He was absolutely right. There were churches out in the
25 countryside that were nothing but piles of bricks. At one point, they had been a church or
26 a Buddhist shrine or some type of a stupa, a Buddhist, and those round things. I found
27 that very interesting. They were able to use our rules of engagement against us. That's
28 kind of a long answer to a short question, but the bottom line was that we were on a
29 crusade trying to help with people that wanted to help themselves. We were unsuccessful.

30 KC: In some ways, but as you mentioned, you look at the Western progress.

31 DP: A little louder, Kelly.

1 KC: I'm sorry. You say that the U.S. was unsuccessful, and it certainly was in a
2 lot of ways, but as you mentioned, you look at the progress that Vietnam has seen.

3 DP: I thought that Vietnam would survive on the model of South Korea, but of
4 course, I was wrong.

5 KC: Well, Colonel, is there anything else you'd like to add before we close out
6 this interview?

7 DP: Not really, it's been a pleasure working with you and if you want me to get
8 you in touch with any other guys. I don't know who you might be interested in.

9 KC: Well, as the saying goes, "We're interested in all comers." As they say. Let me put
10 an end to the interview here, Colonel.