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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with MacAlan Thompson
Conducted by Stephen Maxner
October 6, 2002
Transcribed by Mindy Moser**

1 Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Mac
2 Thompson on the sixth of October, 2002, at approximately 11:30. We are at Myerby's in
3 Thanyaburi, Thailand. Thank you sir, first of all, for consenting to this interview. Let's
4 begin with a brief discussion of your early life. If you would, tell me when and where
5 you were born and where you grew up.

6 MacAlan Thompson: I was born June 11, 1941 in Portland, Oregon. As a kid we
7 lived in various places around the immediate Portland area. I went to grade school and in
8 1953 we moved to Lake Oswego, just a few miles south of Portland. I graduated high
9 school there in 1959 and at that point when off to college at Colorado School of Mines in
10 Golden, Colorado for two years. I have a super respect for people who have graduated
11 from that school. It's a tough school. I made it two years there and then it was time to
12 leave and I went back to Oregon, to Oregon State University, and entered their forestry
13 program, the Forest Engineering program and graduated in June of '63 at Oregon State in
14 Forest Engineering.

15 SM: What did your mom and dad do?

16 MT: Pardon?

17 SM: What did your mother and father do?

18 MT: Oh, Mom was, as typical in those days, was a housewife and took care of the
19 kids, myself and my sister. My dad worked with the civilians for the Corps of Engineers.
20 He had started that before World War II and as a civilian began a low GS grade, was in
21 the Army for a couple years toward the end of the war, then out of the Army and back to
22 the Corps of Engineers. So he ended up retiring in 1969 from the Corps.

23 SM: What did he do in the Army?

24 MT: My dad?

1 SM: When he was in it during the last couple of years of the war.

2 MT: Well, as he described it when I was back in the States earlier this year, my
3 sister was going through all sorts of letters and they found some letters from him. He
4 went in in 1944. He was thirty-five years old with two kids. No, only one kid at that
5 time. He was way beyond the draft age but he declined a further deferment because, as
6 he said once in later years, he said, ‘I want to be able to tell my son when he says, “What
7 did you do during the war, Daddy?”’ “Well, not much but I was in the Army.”’ So he was
8 in the Army, basic training, then went to OCS as second lieutenant as an old man
9 comparatively at thirty-five. He was relegated to the Transportation Corps and then the
10 war ended and he was booked to be sent over to Europe when all the big deals came so he
11 was let out of the Army at that point.

12 SM: Did you have any uncles or other close relatives that served in World War II
13 as well?

14 MT: Well I had one uncle on my father’s side who was a U.S. Naval Academy
15 graduate, Donald Thompson. He graduated in 1937, I think it was, and went on to be a
16 pilot—a carrier pilot. I’ve got some papers at home here that, again, my sister dug out.
17 He was a torpedo bomber expert and did a couple of carrier tours in the Pacific and then
18 about 1943 or ’44 was killed in training accident in Honolulu. His widow—they had two
19 boys called ‘the twins’ that I’ve never met. They live in Los Angeles. My sister finally
20 met them about six months ago after all these years.

21 SM: What a shame.

22 MT: Let’s see. I think that was the only military we had with the uncles-type
23 thing. The others were too old or female (laughs).

24 SM: Okay. Now, when you were going through high school were you drawn to
25 any particular subjects?

26 MT: Oh, I always kind of liked math and science, you know, physics. I wasn’t a
27 great superstar in all of these. I didn’t like biology or that type of thing but more of the—
28 I guess you could call them ‘hard sciences’—others I was interested in and always have
29 been. I would do a little bit of reading and still do. Some anthropology and
30 archeology—it’s fun to dig through things but not much on the great philosophies or
31 economics-type subjects.

1 SM: Okay. History?

2 MT: Pardon?

3 SM: Any interest in history?

4 MT: Oh, some ancient history. Not really modern histories at all.

5 SM: How much of an influence did your dad have on your choice after you left
6 high school to go to Colorado School of Mines and become an engineer?

7 MT: Oh probably not very much at all. One thing Dad had was he had contracted
8 cancer while he was in the Army. In 1946 I think it was, they amputated his left leg, up
9 and including part of the hip bone, which was at that time a very serious operation. He
10 got a wooden leg from the VA but again, it was a wooden leg and too heavy and
11 awkward so he never used the wooden leg. He was on crutches until he died but that was
12 in '47 so in '49 he still kind of thought that kids should learn how to shoot a gun and the
13 like so I got my first gun, a .22, at eight years old, and all the proper cautions, the shotgun
14 at nine or ten and my first deer out with him hunting at twelve years old. He never let me
15 have a BB gun because BB guns are toys and you could put your neighbor's kid's eyes
16 out with so I wasn't allowed to do that.

17 SM: Okay. You got the real thing.

18 MT: Pardon?

19 SM: You got the real thing.

20 MT: Yeah.

21 SM: Now with the shotgun, your first shotgun, was it a 410?

22 MT: 410, right. And then a couple years later when he graduated—well, he
23 bought himself a new one, a sixteen-gauge semi-automatic so the old twelve-gauge was
24 handed down to me.

25 SM: And that's what you hunted with?

26 MT: Oh yeah, yeah.

27 SM: Deer, and anything else?

28 MT: Well, rabbits and blue jays. Those are cheaper to shoot and easier to do
29 year-round. A good friend of mine in high school, John Reuben, he still lives in Lake
30 Oswego, we went out quite often in the wintertime and even the summertime some.
31 Rabbit hunting runs out in the east of Oregon and ducks and pheasants and the like so I

1 did a lot of hunting as kid. We talked about the parental influence on choice of school.
2 There's not much there but one thing I've always been interested in is airplanes. Not
3 really quite sure why but I've got a bunch of on my websites and a lot of books on
4 airplanes and I don't really understand why I went into the Army instead of the Air Force
5 except it never dawned on me—talking with my dad, he'd been in the Army all the way
6 through college. Well, it's just automatic that I'll go in the Army. That's one of the
7 checkmarks you have to do in life. Not so much have to do, but should do.

8 SM: Yes. Now did you get into civilian piloting at all?

9 MT: No.

10 SM: Did you take courses or anything?

11 MT: No, I thought about it. I started skydiving when I was up at the School of
12 Mines at eighteen and I kind of like to joke about it because it's a student pilot soloing
13 with ten or fifteen hours with itches and hiccups. I jumped because I know I could get
14 out and get down to the ground safely jumping. I'm not sure about dead sticking it on a
15 highway. In Laos, as sort of a defensive measure, I learned how to land a helio and land
16 a porter in case of a problem with the pilot and I could do a sort of controlled crash with
17 H-34 helicopters, again, in 1969 or 1970. But the only time I really heard of it happening
18 was when my friend of mine was down in Eugene, Oregon. He was in a jet ranger. This
19 was about 1971 or '72 when the pilot was gunshot over in the Takek area, across from
20 Panole. And helped fly the airplane until they got to a safe area and the pilot was able to
21 put it down on the ground. So that was defensive flying, I guess.

22 SM: Yeah. Now when you graduated from high school did you know that you
23 were going to definitely go to college?

24 MT: That I was going to go?

25 SM: Yeah, did you know as you were graduating from high school that you're
26 definitely going to go to school?

27 MT: Yeah.

28 SM: No doubt about it?

29 MT: No doubt at all. I was just going off the college. I thought about it in later
30 years. After I left Colorado School of Mines I was a little bit down in the dumps, not
31 having done very well there. And I started thinking about maybe taking a couple years

1 out to go in the Army. And Dad, I think rightly, said, ‘No, don’t do that. Just continue
2 on and finish college.’ And in later years I’ve seen—it takes a lot of discipline, I think,
3 for someone who takes a break after high school for two to four years and then to go back
4 to college and I’m not sure I would have had that discipline.

5 SM: Well when you got to Oregon State, why did you choose forest engineering?
6 What drew you to that?

7 MT: Well, there was a partial engineering side of it as opposed to growing the
8 trees. Oregon State had three majors, a regular forestry that sort of grew the trees, the
9 engineers who cut them down—built the roads out of forest products and made
10 something marketable out of it. And I’ve always liked forestry. I like the trees, liked the
11 woods, so it seemed like a logical thing to do. And it also fit kind of the budget, given
12 the courses I had already had at the School of Mines. Everything kind of melded and
13 meshed so I could do still a four-year graduation program instead of having to spend an
14 extra year.

15 SM: Well, while we’re on the subject of your education, did you find that your
16 choice there, forest engineering, and the other classes at the Colorado School of Mines,
17 that that would come in handy later one when you found yourself in a jungle and a
18 heavily wooded environment like Laos?

19 MT: No. The best course I think I ever took in high school or college was my
20 senior year of high school typing class, just a regular old secretarial-type on manual,
21 Underwood machine, and I’ve used more of that more than I have anything else in my
22 life. After I finished college during ’63, I needed to pay off some bills so I asked for a
23 delay in going to the Army until November of ’63 and I worked that summer out in
24 eastern Oregon for ? Management and I did another month for the forest service in
25 Oregon and then went in the Army and never got back to forestry at all. Just absolutely
26 zero.

27 SM: Oh, that’s funny. Okay. Well, when you—

28 MT: Let me interject one thing here.

29 SM: Yeah, go ahead.

30 MT: It’s like kind of like maybe nowadays you might consider a masters degree
31 as the minimum ticket punch to get a job in anything. When did I graduate? ’63. Okay,

1 that's thirty-nine years ago. It wasn't quite to the point that a bachelor's degree was the
2 ticket-punch emphasized but for me maybe it was. I graduated and that opened up a lot
3 of doors in later years. It didn't matter what the degree was in. You just had to have one
4 (laughs).

5 SM: Well, when you graduated from college did you know you were going to go
6 immediately into the Army or quickly into the Army?

7 MT: Oh yeah. I had my orders already.

8 SM: You did?

9 MT: Yeah.

10 SM: When did you get those?

11 MT: From ROTC.

12 SM: Oh, okay, so this was a land grant school? Oregon State was a land grant
13 school so you had to take ROTC.

14 MT: At land grant schools you only had to take ROTC for two years and I did that
15 at the School of Mines. Then when I went to Oregon State I applied for the second two
16 years, the senior ROTC program. So at graduation, we did that in our Army uniforms
17 and we got our bars pinned on and you got your diploma.

18 SM: Okay. And this brought with it a two-year commitment in the Army.

19 MT: Two years, right.

20 SM: And of course since your degree was in forest engineering it made sense that
21 you branched engineering.

22 MT: Right. Well, at Oregon State that had two or three branches that specialized
23 in the ROTC cords. I think nowadays it's more general ROTC but at Oregon State we
24 took engineering ROTC in the Army side.

25 SM: So there was no doubt about what branch you would be in when you got into
26 the Army.

27 MT: No.

28 SM: Well, why don't you describe first where you went for you initial Army
29 training, your basic course, and what was that introduction into the active-duty military
30 life like for you?

1 MT: Oh, well, it was not much different. It was more of an academic thing. We
2 were staying in the BOQ at Fort Bellmore. That was November of '63 through the end of
3 January of '64. BOQs, classes, indoor classes, outdoor classes, demolition, bridge
4 building, some construction techniques, a one-week field exercise and all during this time
5 I had—my orders at that time were to Fort Devons, Massachusetts for two years. We had
6 a guy come down from the Pentagon one day, for personnel, and say, 'Hey, all of you
7 lieutenants, you're all second lieutenants; you're all 1331 MOS. If anyone wants to
8 change their orders just let us know by the deadline.' I put a little 3x5 card up on the
9 bulletin board, 'Does anybody want to go to Fort Devons?' One guy contacted me. He
10 was going to Germany but that was three years and I didn't want to do another year.
11 Another guy was going to Korea and it was wintertime and that didn't sound very good.
12 about a day before the deadline another lieutenant comes up and says, 'Hey, I've been
13 looking for you. I'm from fifty miles from Fort Devons and my wife is seven months
14 pregnant and would you swap?' 'Well, where are you going?' 'Well, Khorat, Thailand.'
15 Well, I knew where Thailand was but had no idea where Khorat was but given the day
16 before the deadline, okay, I'll swap. Just on a fluke, thirty-eight and a half years later I'm
17 still here (laughs).

18 SM: How long did you have before you left for Thailand?

19 MT: Pardon?

20 SM: When did you leave for Thailand? That was February of '64?

21 MT: Right. I drove a car with all my stuff from Fort Bellmore back to Oregon. It
22 was about a two-week trip and it was mid-February, about sixteen Feb or nineteen Feb of
23 '64 I arrived in Bangkok for two days and then to Khorat.

24 SM: Did you know what you'd be doing? Where you told what your primary
25 responsibilities would be?

26 MT: Well, I had a unit assignment, the Flag 28th Engineer Detachment Utility,
27 which had about twenty-five troops. It had NCOs and enlisted men and there was one 2nd
28 lieutenant and that was the post engineer from Camp Friendship and Camp USARTHAI
29 at Khorat. There was also—the officer in charge was not on the books. There was a
30 major, an engineer major because we had, at that time, about a hundred and sixty-some
31 Thai working with us. You know, carpenters and plumbers and on up and that would

1 have been more than a second lieutenant would normally have. And then also we were
2 attached to the 44 Engineer Headquarters Company and those one or two officers there
3 and their troops were also involved in the Post Engineer building. So there was a little
4 528th as kind of an offset and kind of morphs organization for the 4th Headquarters
5 Company. We all cooperated and did the same work. At that time, in February of '64
6 the entire U.S. air power in Khorat was commanded by a captain and had about forty
7 enlisted men and no airplanes.

8 SM: What were they doing?

9 MT: Well, they were sort of standing by for the Vietnam War to start and it was
10 August, '64—was that the Gulf of Tonkin?

11 SM: Yes.

12 MT: The incident when suddenly airplanes started flying into Khorat and the Air
13 Force just started building up like mad. The Army didn't change the strength very much.
14 The Army was always at about a thousand or twelve hundred people and the Air Force
15 went from forty people up to Khorat and ten or twelve thousand people.

16 SM: Now what were your responsibilities there with the 528th? What kind of
17 projects did you work on?

18 MT: Well we were doing camp construction. The basic camp was already there
19 but you saw it. Did you go to the NKP, the airbase around there? You saw all the
20 concrete buildings?

21 SM: Oh yes.

22 MT: Well at this time in '64, everything was wood at Camp Friendship and at the
23 base so we were building the wooden hooches, the sixteen by thirty-two foot living
24 quarters and building warehouses—forty by a hundred food warehouses—ten-hole
25 latrines. You know, dug-hole latrines. No flush toilets. There were several clubs, the
26 officers, NCO, EM club we built, the mess halls we built. One of the Thai guys who was
27 at the party, the reunion this past weekend had worked for me as a plumber at Khorat in
28 '64. He later went on to bigger and better things. He worked at the CIA in Laos and was
29 a former air guide. Oh, he was a support for the air guide program.

30 SM: What was his code name?

1 MT: Oh, he didn't have a code name. He was support. Another guy that worked
2 for me in Khorat in our little 528th was a clerk typist and I ran into him in Wung Chang in
3 1971, just walking down the ramp, and he turned around and said, 'Hey, Lieutenant
4 Thompson, is that you?' 'Wieboo, what the hell are you doing here?' 'I'm Wild Bill
5 now.' He's got his M-16 and he's got all his camis and hardware and anything. He was
6 all through the thick of the fighting up there at Long Chang and PHA in San Tong.

7 SM: And his code name was Wild Bill?

8 MT: Wild Bill. His radio call sign was Wild Bill. He had started out with us in
9 Khorat in '64 as a clerk typist.

10 SM: Well, these barracks and other facilities that you were building at Camp
11 Friendship, who were they being built for? Were they for anticipated Americans coming
12 over?

13 MT: No, we had the U.S. Army that we were initially building for and doing
14 maintenance and then when the Air Force started coming in in August '64, we went over
15 to just about ninety percent building for the construction for the Air Force for their build-
16 up through the end of '64. It took them that long to get their own BCE people, their base
17 civil engineering people in and their preparation system set up to buy lumber and wire
18 and plumbing and everything else they need.

19 SM: Now were there any other engineer organizations helping with this stuff in
20 Thailand?

21 MT: Not at the construction and repair of utilities in Khorat, no. It had been
22 built—it started, I think, in '63, possibly late '62 and one company, the 561st heavy
23 construction company, had done a major effort on the construction but they were pulled
24 out of Khorat in about November of '63 to move south of Khorat and work with the 809th
25 Engineer Battalion on the Bangkok bypass road, which at that time was I think one of the
26 larger strictly U.S. projects in the world.

27 SM: Was there very much interaction and cooperation between American Army
28 engineers and Thai Army engineers?

29 MT: Not there at Khorat, no. The 809th down south of Khorat on the Bangkok
30 bypass road did have a Thai battalion working with them and they also worked—the
31 809th later went up and did the rebuild of the 1967 and '68 rebuild of the road at Gordese

1 and on over to Pong Panoa. And I don't remember the Thai battalion's number but it's
2 on a couple of the websites.

3 SM: Well, when you first arrived in February of '64, I failed to ask you three
4 months earlier of course Kennedy had been assassinated.

5 MT: Pardon?

6 SM: Kennedy. President Kennedy had been assassinated.

7 MT: November of '63 when we were at Fort Bellmore.

8 SM: Yeah, when you were still at Fort Bellmore. I wanted to ask you how that
9 impacted you. How did that affect you?

10 MT: Well, surprised. Somebody came into our class—we were in academics at
11 that time—and made the announcement and said, 'Class has been cancelled.' Was that a
12 Thursday? I forget the day of the week but it made for a long weekend and everything
13 was cancelled for the next four days. It was an emotional time for everybody there at
14 Bellmore but it was not something that we were going to be pondering on for the next ten
15 years.

16 SM: Well what did you think about President Kennedy's policies towards
17 Southeast Asia? Did you have any opinions at the time?

18 MT: I really didn't know that much about it. I had read about it in Time and
19 Newsweek Magazine earlier when I was in college. I think I wrote a one-page or two-
20 page paper in ROTC about Vietnam. Again, I didn't know anything about Laos and I had
21 no idea what we were doing in Thailand. I wrote this one or two-page thing in maybe the
22 fall of '62 or earlier in '63, you know, sort of 'Are we supporting the wrong people in
23 Vietnam?' with all the monks burning and everything else it just sounded like bad
24 politics. So that was no big, deep thoughts on the subject.

25 SM: Well when you got to Thailand in '64, what did you see in terms of how did
26 you see your project and your work fitting into the larger American policy in Thailand?
27 What were we trying to accomplish?

28 MT: Well, I didn't know what the larger American policy in Thailand was. I
29 don't think I had heard the domino theory at that time, I didn't know about the war in
30 Laos and as I talked with a lot of people over the years there have been many, particularly
31 who were in the Air Force who were in Thailand who didn't know what was going on in

1 Laos or the bombings in Laos and the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The basic thing for Khorat, or
2 major unit, the overall unit there was the 9th Logistics Command V, the 9th Log
3 Command V, and its main reason for being was to have preposition stocks for
4 contingencies. We had umpteen miles of pipeline there for fuel pipelines and I think that
5 was why pipeline was put in in later years. We had a large—again, this was not under
6 our umbrella. There was another unit that was in charge of what they called the SLAT
7 demo. I don't remember what S-L-A-T stood for but it was 'Strategic something or
8 other.' But it was BFOs, APCs, deuce-and-a-half trucks, jeeps, radio jeeps with markings
9 on them for the 25th Infantry Division that was still in Hawaii at the time. You know, the
10 idea being that an alert would come, 'The 25th is flying into Khorat,' and people would
11 get their batteries in and get them gassed up right out at the airport and the troops would
12 get off of their airplanes, get in the vehicle and the bumper plates would all be marked for
13 them and they'd go off to war. Then the 25th went to Vietnam so somebody had a big
14 painting job to do.

15 SM: (laughs) That's right.

16 MT: There were a lot of things going on in Khorat. The Seabees were there.

17 SM: I was going to ask you about the Seabees.

18 MT: We've been looking on the web, trying to contact a few of the Seabees of the
19 TLC group and a couple of other groups. 'Hey, who are you and what were you doing?'
20 I'd remember them coming in once or twice a year and coming in to pick up their
21 equipment and disappearing for six months, going out and doing civil affairs work. They
22 would come back in, turn the equipment in and disappear.

23 SM: This civil affairs work that they did, was this construction?

24 MT: Yeah. I think they were out building schools and dispensary-type things.
25 But I never really got to talk to them. There were a couple of special forces lieutenants in
26 the area that would come in once a month to pick up their pay, basically, and pick up a
27 load of beer. One of the guys I talked with, Usaw—Usee now but Usaw at that time—
28 didn't have enough field staff so they went out to the Army, I guess, and got some—I
29 don't know if they were language qualified or not but they had U.S. Army people
30 working for an entire organization and working with the ARD, Accelerator Rural
31 Development, program in Thailand.

1 SM: Did you know at the time if Special Forces were still operating into Laos?

2 MT: At that time I didn't know. That, again, was '64. Well, Special Forces had
3 been in Laos. Back then it was White Star Corps in the early sixties.

4 SM: But they were, of course, of Urim? In '63, we weren't supposed to have
5 anybody, any military personnel working Laos, but of course that wasn't necessarily the
6 case.

7 MT: Right.

8 SM: We still had people working in Laos although they were not in uniform.

9 MT: Right. Well, and we always had our attaché people, too, so whether those
10 counted or not...

11 SM: Okay. And when did you first see Air America or Civil Air Transport
12 operating in that area?

13 MT: Well, Air America at that time. There was a US office in Khorat and they
14 had a very, very small porter airplane and I was over there for some reason or another one
15 day and I saw a porter over there. That was Air America and we had our own problems
16 and I wasn't really wondering what they were doing. I heard later about them being up at
17 Udorn as a base but I had no idea that they were working Laos at the time (laughs).

18 SM: When did you learn that they were actually working as part of the CIA?

19 MT: Oh, that was probably after I got to Laos in '66.

20 SM: '66, okay, with IBS.

21 MT: That was never a secret. It was common knowledge. It was not like
22 somebody told me that over a bar and swore me to silence.

23 SM: Well, but they did try to maintain the perception—

24 MT: The façade.

25 SM: —the façade that this was just a civilian corporation operating in Thailand
26 and eventually in Laos and they had Cassie and Bert Air and Arizona helicopters and
27 those were all also invited in as part of that façade. 'This is for your market capitalism.'

28 MT: I had never visited their offices in Bangkok. I heard later of course that they
29 were on Mat Long. I visited the Udorn office just in '66 and that was it on the way to
30 Laos. I can't be precise on when I heard that they were CIA proprietary but it just wasn't
31 something that was questionable. 'Okay, fine, they are, but let's get on with the

1 program.' The same with Continental. I mean, they had Continental and Air America
2 had USAID contracts and they had CIA contracts. You know, Continental was not CIA
3 but they flew for both organizations or just wanted into Laos, too. I can think back to
4 early '69 at Luang Prabok. We had three porters—two on the CIA and one on the
5 USAID contract and a lot of ground fog in the morning. So the planes, the night before,
6 would be loaded up with rice and the pilots would come out early in the morning, maybe
7 before we got there. They'd just take off through the fog and go up and do a rice drop,
8 which was our USAF program. They'd come back after an hour and the fog would be
9 burned off. Maybe we'd do another rice drop—burned off the airport but not off the
10 country—and maybe a couple more rice drops. Then they'd come back and all three
11 porters would go maybe to do ammo drops or special drops when the up-country fogs
12 burned off. You know, we didn't worry about cost sharing. Again, it was all one U.S.
13 government program. Now when later people got into the cost sharing, and they did
14 along the line, the two contracts working that week on the CIA contract would just sit on
15 the ground and the USAF guy would go off and fly and he'd get ten hours that day and
16 the two CIA contract guys for that day might get seven hours and they weren't very
17 happy. But a beauracrat caught us (laughs).

18 SM: Okay. Well, for your first tour with the Army in Thailand, in Khorat, did
19 you start learning Thai at that point?

20 MT: A little bit, yeah. Not deliberately learning Thai but when you're there for a
21 year I kind of got the standard hundred or two hundred word GI vocabulary.

22 SM: The most important things.

23 MT: I learned how to count. Well, it was a lot more than I learned later in my two
24 years in Sudan and my almost two years in Russia in Moscow.

25 SM: What were the rules about interacting with the Thai people? Were there any?

26 MT: No, not that I recall at all. We were generally working five and a half or six
27 days a week. Later, when the airports came in, we went to around a seven-day
28 workweek. Not twenty-four hours a day but ten or twelve hours a day. At least that was
29 our unit. Different units might have had different rules. We had, if somebody screwed
30 up—and this is for the enlisted men—a pretty well hundred percent pass policy. Just be
31 at work at six o'clock in the morning at morning formation and ready to put walls to the

1 wall again. I remember we had a chief warrant officer, W-4 Amex. His kind of special
2 punishment for somebody—I remember once we had an electrician come in, a GI. A real
3 good guy but he was all hung over and he couldn't work very well so Amex said, 'Okay,
4 well, up the pole. Up the pole on his spurs and stay there for three hours in the sun.' Or
5 if somebody got—I remember I'd get calls occasionally from the MP. 'Hey, Lieutenant,
6 we've got one of your guys out here.' And we didn't have a jail in Khorat but maybe
7 have a Connex with windows cut in it for ventilation and a grass roof over the top of it to
8 keep some of the heat off and psycho-intensifying. 'Okay, we'll be over mid-morning or
9 noon to pick him up.' But it got hot and it got uncomfortable. I don't know, maybe that
10 was the punishment. We didn't have much for article 15 punishments in those days.

11 SM: Okay. So it was basically at the discretion of the senior NCOs and officers
12 on site what kind of punishment you all got, as opposed to an article 15 or UCMJ
13 punishment.

14 MT: Well, we had court-martials there. We did not have general court martial
15 authority. Those had to go back to Okinawa but we had special and summary court
16 martials. I ended up being, for the defense council, an eleventh court martial.

17 SM: What were the infractions, typically?

18 MT: Mostly they were AWOL. You know, for three to five days the guy falls in
19 love and he disappears and he gets caught or he comes back in. So as this is your first
20 trip to Bangkok, you could see how that could happen, even at your advanced age.

21 SM: Oh yeah, the temptations. Well, okay. Any other major problems? Any
22 discipline problems other than women and drinking? I guess those would be the most
23 important.

24 MT: No, there might be fighting. There was one fight that we had, a PFC in our
25 unit—he was sort of drunk at the club and he decided that he wanted to go downtown so
26 he went to the motor pool and in essence, stole a deuce-and-a-half truck and drove it
27 through the front gate. Because the Thai guards, they weren't going to let him through,
28 so he drove it through the front gate, drove it downtown, wanted to go to this one
29 particular bar and whorehouse and the truck wouldn't fit down the little alley going to the
30 house so he just moved over and put it in all-wheel drive and drove over the trees and
31 everything and knocked down the front steps. So anyway, he was arrested, he was back.

1 I forget what level of court martial, not very high, but he was fined and busted and they
2 made him pay it back. And because he was a good guy and a good worker, the day
3 before he left he was transferring out—six months later or four months later—through the
4 presidio of San Francisco, he went through morning formation and they gave his stripes
5 back to him. Not me, but the company commander did.

6 SM: Well, that's decent.

7 MT: Yeah, I don't remember any—I'm sure there may have been, I just didn't
8 hear of the bad and ugly incidents. Not robberies or things of that sort. I did have the
9 CID people come in to see me one day. We also had something called the water point.
10 We had our own water purification units that were located maybe five or six kilometers
11 away from the camp. They said, 'Hey, Lieutenant, come with us. We have a
12 beautification program going on at the top, putting flowers around.' We go doing to the
13 water point and the CID NCO says, 'Hey, Lieutenant, you know what those are?' 'No,
14 what's that?' 'That's marijuana.' 'Oh.' (laughs) So I think a couple of our guys who lived
15 at the water point got into some trouble about it. I don't remember what punishment, if
16 anything, they had but we watched the water point much closer after that.

17 SM: And how about in terms of drugs? What about opium? Was there a
18 problem?

19 MT: I never heard anything about opium. Just like nowadays up in northeast
20 Thailand, marijuana is pretty freely available in some places. Back then, thirty or forty
21 years ago and probably some places now you'll find it at restaurants, at a noodle shop, as
22 one of the condiments to put in your soup. You know dried marijuana. I don't remember
23 ever seeing it and putting it in my soup but it was available. Just like in Laos they were
24 saying with marijuana, packaged and already rolled, was cheaper than buying cigarettes.
25 But I remember no incidents with drugs at all during my year at Khorat at the time.

26 SM: But is it still available in places like this as a condiment?

27 MT: I doubt if it's so common here. Way up country and out in the bush it might
28 be but Thailand has become so conscious about the drug amphetamine problem in the last
29 ten or fifteen years and the police are doing a much—those police who are not involved
30 in the drug trade are doing a much better job on controlling the narcotics in the bush.

1 SM: You mentioned the water purification system. What kind of a system was
2 that?

3 MT: The ERDELATOR.

4 SM: The ERDELATOR?

5 MT: it came from the Engineer Research and Development Lab 'Ator,' invented,
6 I think, at Fort Bellmore. That's where the Engineer Research and Development
7 Laboratory was. All the engineers worked out of Fort Bell or Fort Leaneordwood. That
8 end is located there now. But we had, as I remember, two of them.

9 SM: For all of your construction, did you rely on domestic supply? Were all
10 those supplies brought in or a combination?

11 MT: Mostly local purchase from Bangkok and Khorat. Again, we were going to
12 fast on the construction, particularly after the Air Force moved in that it was not at all
13 uncommon to, in the afternoon, take one of our moboys and park it downtown Khorat at a
14 lumber yard. It would show up the next morning with a load of lumber on it and it would
15 show up directly at the construction site and it would be nailed on to the building right
16 then and it had just been sawed the day before. So it was not kiln dried. Over the next
17 weeks or months it would bend and crack and get holes in them as they dried out. Nails
18 were not very high quality at the time. They bend a lot and this is Thai soft wood,
19 Maiyat, is about the same density or slightly less dense than oak and walnut. Those are
20 pretty good U.S. hardwood.

21 SM: Yeah, they are.

22 MT: So we went through lots of nails. We bought wire and the electrical stuff
23 was all bought locally. Toilet paper I think came from the U.S. and plywood from the
24 U.S.

25 SM: Okay. Let's see. Other shortages or problems with materials?

26 MT: Oh, not that I remember particularly.

27 SM: Okay. If you needed something you could typically find it here locally.

28 MT: Well, usually. I mean, we did buy things from the U.S. We were doing
29 rehab on the 31st field hospital so we needed static group knots, static linoleum for the
30 operating room in the hospital. That was ordered from the U.S. and other items we
31 ordered from the U.S. but we were buying construction-type materials. Other units, the

1 ordinance unit or medical units were probably buying all of or most of their stuff from the
2 U.S. or ordering from Army depots in Okinawa.

3 SM: Well, I've talked about water purifications, the supplies, were there any other
4 interesting events or challenges to your first year in Thailand?

5 MT: Oh, no. in retrospect I think it was just kind of an awakening just to another
6 part of the world. I had never been to Canada before and I'd never been to Mexico.
7 Canada was pretty close to Portland, Oregon and I just never had any real incentive to go
8 up there. So that was probably the most significant event. You know, I went back to the
9 States, had another nine months in the Army. Oh, that was at Dougway, Utah, about
10 eight months at Dougway Moving Grounds outside of Salt Lake City. I got out of the
11 Army and started sending out job applications and I was interested in getting back to this
12 part of the world. So they were all kind of oriented for either surveying, engineering or
13 whatever, but not having had a lot of real working experience I had a number of reject
14 letters. I applied for a kicker job with Air America. I had a reject letter from them. I
15 applied for a job with USAID, particularly USAID Vietnam or USAID Laos and this
16 would have been late fall of '65 or early '66 and had a reject letter from USAID, too,
17 which is kind of strange in retrospect since I ended up retiring from USAID.

18 SM: Yeah, that is funny. Well, what did you do at Dougway?

19 MT: Dougway, initially I signed papers. By law it takes a Corps of Engineers
20 officer to sign a number of reports and papers. So I was initially the Post Engineer
21 Officer at Dougway as 2nd lieutenant and then later made my eighteen-watts 1st lieutenant
22 and was between majors. It was a major slot so they had me signing papers and not
23 doing very much and then the major came in and so I went over to do admin work at post
24 headquarters for the next five or six months before I got out of the Army. My major
25 accomplishment there was learning how to shoot a .45 well. Absolutely nothing to do at
26 Dougway. I had bought a secondhand international match .45 for myself and another
27 couple of the lieutenants. We'd often go out in the evening and just shoot jackrabbits
28 (laughs).

29 SM: All right. Well that's a useable skill later in life. And what about when you
30 left? What did you think about what the United States was doing in Thailand, especially
31 the massive build-up that occurred, as you mentioned, after August of '64 with the Gulf

1 of Tonkin incidence and this massive influx. What did you think about that aspect of our
2 policy? Did you think it was going to be productive?

3 MT: Well, I had no idea if it would be productive or not. I was for the policy. I
4 was never against the Vietnam War or the efforts in Thailand or even later when I got to
5 Laos, too. Otherwise I wouldn't have stayed for nine years in Laos. I see on the emails
6 and on our TLCB net just recently these past few days, some people were talking about
7 when they left Thailand and went back to the States in the late sixties and '71 and things
8 like that, getting met at San Francisco airport with 'Baby killer this, baby killer that.'
9 The times I went back, of course I was in civilian clothes, that didn't happen and I didn't
10 see any incidents like that. If I had seen it I think it would have bothered me quite a bit.

11 SM: But then again, you were—I think another significant difference perhaps for
12 you and for a lot of people that worked in Thailand and Laos, you worked at an area
13 where you could see you were making an improvement where you were. You were
14 improving the situation. I would imagine you got quite a bit of gratification from that.

15 MT: Well, yes. In Thailand in the Army we were not doing civil affairs works.
16 We weren't improving things necessarily with the Thai but we were working with a lot of
17 Thai. And especially, as I said, when I got there we had over a hundred Thai working for
18 us. We had a small number of GI's and a large number of Thai. By the time I left I think
19 we had about the same number of GI's, a hundred and fifty, but we had four hundred and
20 sixty-five Thai working for us. Let me back up a little bit. I think one of the most
21 impressive things I found in my time in Thailand is you take an Army PFC who was a
22 road raider operator and you give him a thirty-man Thai crew and in effect he's a platoon
23 leader. You say, 'Go out and build a road and if there's a problem, let us know.
24 Otherwise come back in a week and repave this road. Oil it, spread gravel on it, roll it,
25 If there's a problem, let us know. If there's not a problem just come back tell us it's
26 done.' We had one guy that I'd like to run down. I think his name was Lobeck and he
27 was a farmer from Iowa or someplace in the central U.S. and someplace he had learned
28 about electricity. We got the word filtered down to do a full re-wiring on Camp
29 USARTHAI, which was where the colonel stayed, over closer to Khorat town. And
30 nobody really knew very much about electricity except PFC Lobeck. So we made out the
31 bill of materials and we ordered several tens of thousands of dollars worth of generators

1 and wire and heavy wire. You know, and inch in diameter copper wire and everything
2 and it eventually came in and Lobeck goes over there with his team of Thai electricians.
3 They install everything and we throw the switch. All the lights come on and kudos
4 comes down from the group 9th log commander to the 44th Engineer group commander
5 to company commander and it filtered down to me. ‘Lobeck, you did a goddamn good
6 job.’ He said, ‘Lieutenant, what do you I get out of it other than a thank you?’ ‘Well,
7 what do you want?’ He said, ‘Well, it’s coming on planting season. Can I get an early
8 out of the Army for three months?’ We call up the 1st sergeant and yeah, that’s possible.
9 So that was his reward.

10 SM: To get to go home and help with his family farm. That’s cool.

11 MT: But this was, at least in our engineer unit there, very common with our
12 enlisted troops and NCOs. You give them then or twenty Thai to work with and the job
13 got done with very little supervision.

14 SM: That’s pretty impressive that you could trust your lower enlisted ranks like
15 that. That’s very impressive.

16 MT: I don’t know why but it worked. With all the other things I heard later, with
17 all the problems in Vietnam and the like and just the U.S. military in general, I keep
18 going back to this. Give the guys an opportunity to perform and in general, they’ll
19 perform. You’ll find a dead head now and then.

20 SM: That’s very impressive. And you were saying ‘USARTHAI.’ That’s U.S.
21 Army?

22 MT: U.S. Army Thailand, and that was our headquarters. We also called it 9th
23 Log because that was headquarters for 9th Log. It was changed in later years to U.S.
24 Support Thailand, U.S. Army Support Thailand.

25 SM: Okay. Great. Well, I think this pretty much covers your first tour. Did you
26 want to add anything else?

27 MT: Not now.

28 SM: Okay, great. Then I guess we can end the first interview with Mac
29 Thompson. Thank you very much.

30 MT: Okay.

31 SM: That’s great.