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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Theodore Acheson
Conducted by Richard Verrone
April 28 and 29, 2003
Transcribed by Jennifer McIntyre**

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

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone, I'm continuing my oral history
2 interview with Mr. Theodore Acheson. Today is the 29th of April. It's approximately
3 9:35 AM Central Standard Time, I'm again in Lubbock, and Mr. Acheson is in
4 Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. Sir, before we continue with your narrative with the story,
5 you said that you had something that you wanted to add to your very first Vietnam tour
6 back in '68.

7 Theodore Acheson: That's correct. I wanted to express, there was another officer
8 that did go out, who really was looking for combat and this name was, he was a Captain
9 and his name was Rick Griffith and he was really gung ho about getting combat and his
10 idea was that the group would go out and find this, find the combat that was going on,
11 this was during the second Tet Offensive of 1968, where they had tried to overrun Saigon
12 once again. He had never, I don't think he had ever gone out in the field before and we
13 weren't far, I mean this was all happening in and around Saigon where he was and he was
14 going to go out and give the photographic team fire coverage if they got into trouble.
15 Well he thought this was fun and games in my opinion and I think also Bryan Grigsby
16 will express it as well and maybe even Harry Breedlove and Alfred Butumbucal who had
17 gone out with him, instead of giving covering fire if they needed it, he actually was firing
18 on the NVA and the VC, drawing fire to the camera teams, doing just the opposite of
19 what his original so-called intent was. And instead of keeping the team out of harm's

1 way, it actually was putting the team in harm's way. And Captain Griffith found out that
2 it really wasn't fun and games, Harry Breedlove had gotten shot in the leg, I can't
3 remember if he was hit by a bullet or if it was shrapnel, I think he was hit by a round the
4 day before and the next day no one got hit and then the day after that, Captain Griffith got
5 part of his arm shot off. But again I had mentioned that there weren't officers, some of
6 the officers didn't, most of the officers never went into the field, he was one that did,
7 which we wished that he hadn't and we had some like John Gilroy and Carl Williams,
8 both officers who would go out with the men and try to make our jobs better and enhance
9 the assignments.

10 RV: Right, okay. All right well, do you want to jump back to.

11 TA: Yes, let's go back.

12 RV: You returned to Hawaii after your second Vietnam tour.

13 TA: Yes, I went back to Hawaii and gosh, I remember sitting in my apartment and
14 watching Neil Armstrong live put his foot on the moon, I had a nice '53 MG that I always
15 was working on, I think all of my buddies would attest to that, they had to push that car,
16 come and pick me up or do something, it was always breaking down but it was a cool car,
17 it was a neat little car. Anyway I had a stripped down at the base garage, painting it and
18 restoring it and I had plenty of time because I had orders to go back to Thailand once
19 gain, boy I was really excited about going back to Thailand because I loved Thailand.
20 And one of the guys, as I mentioned before, this one fellow that used to jump off the third
21 floor, Cray Steve Baquette, he had recently gotten married and his wife had come down
22 with spinal meningitis. Well, Steve got sent back to Hawaii and I was the next one to
23 rotate out, instead of going back to Thailand, I got sent back to Vietnam on August 13th to
24 replace him.

25 RV: How did you feel about not getting Thailand and going back to Nam?

26 TA: I really, I mean I was so disappointed and again that was one of the last
27 places in the world I wanted to go back to. I figured every day I spent there the odds were
28 getting stacked against me and I just, even though the last time I mean I went out on a
29 few combat operations it was still, you know anything could happen at any time but
30 fortunately nothing did. But anyway after I got back to Vietnam, the first assignment I
31 had was covering President Nixon's withdrawal of troops and this was his first group to

1 go back to the U.S. and we were shooting them up in Cam Ranh Bay, I do not recall the
2 unit that, the first unit to be sent out under his agreement to bring, to Vietnamize
3 Vietnam. But when I was up there we kept getting those false reports, you know go here,
4 go there, they're going to leave, they're not going to leave and I was always cleaning my
5 camera gate and getting ready to shoot and really was working very hard at making sure
6 everything was all in order and when we finally got the call we headed out to Cam Ranh
7 and the shots were like guys walking up and the stewardesses giving them kisses and
8 waving at them, they even had a little band playing there and gosh I just did all kinds of
9 shots of the band and the stewardesses throwing kisses and then I shot it until the plane
10 pulled away and Geez, I thought to myself I've been shooting this for a long time, I
11 haven't had to change magazines, I'm wondering what in the heck was going on. Well
12 my film come in, I was shooting this with what's called an Aeri BL and it was a sync
13 sound job, I looked at my film counter and I'd shot eight hundred feet, well that was
14 pretty, that's almost impossible because its only a four hundred foot roll in the camera. I
15 opened up the camera and with all my preparation, all the waiting, all the cleaning of the
16 age and everything else, somewhere in the line I forgot to put the film back into the film
17 gate, I had nothing. But lucky for me and lucky for the viewers back in the United States
18 there was a second plane, because they needed more than one place to take these guys
19 back, so they did the same thing, they struck up the band, the stewardesses were throwing
20 kisses and kissing the guys as they were going on and well, what the American public
21 saw was not the first real group to leave Vietnam, they saw the second group.

22 RV: Well that worked out well for you.

23 TA: Yes, nobody else knew.

24 RV: Let me ask you quickly about the Vietnamization process, based on what you
25 witnessed in Southeast Asia over the couple of years, did you think that the South
26 Vietnamese forces were capable of taking over that war and defending their country
27 themselves?

28 TA: Unequivocally no. I thought it was an easy way for us to pull out and try to
29 save face, I had no confidence whatsoever that they could pull this off.

30 RV: Why is that?

1 TA: They just, number one the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese really didn't have
2 a will to win this war. They really did not have the spirit to win it and I also saw it come
3 down from the top, I mean all the way from the graft that was going on at the very top, it
4 filtered all the way down to these poor soldiers that we would encounter in the field and
5 these guys would have their families with them, who were cooking meals for them, they
6 had nothing and whatever they had, part of their paycheck went to the senior NCO above
7 him and then that NCO part of this went to the officer above him and et cetera all the way
8 up the ladder, so there was graft even within the military. I mean these people didn't, I
9 mean they were conscripted, they had no will to go out and fight, even though it was their
10 war, I don't really to this day felt that they really cared one way or the other. There
11 certainly was a group of people in South Vietnam that did but they had no majority to
12 back them up. Everybody it seemed like in the South was intent on making a dollar and
13 rather than having to fight the war, they'd rather have the Americans do it for them.

14 RV: Do you think they had become dependent on the Americans, overly
15 dependent?

16 TA: Oh, absolutely and it was, you know if they needed something they would
17 have the Americans do it, they wouldn't do it themselves and that's what I saw a lot of. If
18 they needed a water plant, well they'd have the Americans build it and they wouldn't get
19 involved in it, it was too much work. In fighting, if they got into a bad firefight it was
20 better to retreat than to charge forward. It was, they had really no will and I found that the
21 VC and of course the NVA felt that that was their country and there was North/South, it
22 was Vietnam to them.

23 RV: Do you think part of the problem might have been teaching democracy or
24 trying to install capitalism in a country that really had no tradition of those two things?

25 TA: I really don't know if, I really think it came down to a philosophy, I don't
26 think, I mean this could have been any kind of government. I just felt that the people of
27 the North felt that this was part of their country, I don't know if Ho Chi Minh had gone to
28 socialism instead of communism or if he'd gone to capitalism, I don't know, that part of
29 their country was theirs in their mind and they wanted it and there was a lot of the people
30 in the south that felt somewhat nationalistic as well, that country was part of, there was
31 no North and South, it was to be one Vietnam. But I do think we, in the South the

1 capitalism, they sure found out how quickly they could make a buck and they did. And
2 I'm not saying that, hey if I was in their shoes I'm probably be doing the same, trying to
3 do the same thing but there was nobody left to really morally defend their own country,
4 because nobody wanted to take that upon themselves to go out and put their own life on
5 the line, they'd rather have the Americans put their lives on the line.

6 RV: Okay. Why don't you go ahead and continue then.

7 TA: All right. In this villa we had, the officers had a room on the bottom floor, the
8 next floor we had a big screening room and I think we even built a little bar area up there
9 and then there were one, two, three bedrooms on the second floor, one bedroom was a
10 single and then we had two bedrooms I think that had two or three beds in each and then
11 on the next floor up there was one large room and then the NCO that was in charge had
12 his own room, then we had a little rooftop on top of that, a little balcony. But we had one
13 fellow that lived with us that he was, he'd have a few drinks and he was wound a little
14 tight about being in Vietnam and I can't remember if he'd been to Vietnam with another
15 group before or what but he spelt with his M-16 with the safety off and a round in the
16 chamber.

17 RV: Really, in his bed?

18 TA: In his bed. And his name was Akers and he would have, if he had a little bit
19 too much to drink he would just say pass out or fall asleep in his bunk and then outside
20 we always had, I mean there were trucks backfiring all the time, of course everybody
21 would jump but while you were sleeping and if they set off some fireworks or something
22 and a truck would backfire, he would come just charging out of his room with his
23 skivvies on, just screaming and running around with his M-16, "Where are they? Where
24 are they?" and all of us would scream at him and hit the floor and I said god, I didn't
25 know if I was ever going to get shot by the enemy or if I was going to get shot by Akers.
26 But I had an M-16 in my room at that time, but I certainly didn't have a round in the
27 chamber or the safety off.

28 RV: That's pretty dangerous to say the least. Let me ask you, what did you guys
29 do for recreation, entertainment?

30 TA: Well we had, that's excellent because we had a little basketball court in our
31 yard and we had a nice front yard and we had several dogs that we used to go out and

1 play with and rough house with and we also, I think we had a basketball game just about
2 every night and then we also played cards a lot, played poker and even some of us
3 learned how to play bridge over there bit poker was the main game. And we had a couple
4 of officers that were really bad poker players.

5 RV: You invited them to play as often as possible?

6 TA: That's exactly right and I mean we had one poor guy that just, I mean I don't
7 know how much he lost but his name was Brown and he was probably one of the worst
8 poker players I've ever seen in my life and he lost a lot of money. But we used to, we had
9 I think everybody had their own, I can't remember what our policy was on alcohol but I
10 mean we could have a drink, we could have some beers in the villa, it wasn't a problem.

11 RV: How about drug use?

12 TA: You know we had a few guys that would go up on the roof and smoke some
13 pot. I think everybody just about in our unit had smoked some pot at one time or another
14 and I do know when you would get it over there, they'd walk by our front gate and you'd
15 get a pack of Winstons or Marlboros that look just like a pack of regular cigarettes, even
16 with a filter with the. They had a factory pumping them out with grass and you'd just go
17 up on the roof and smoke. I think just about everybody in the unit including some of the
18 officers partook in having a joint once in a while but nobody, there was no one in our
19 group that did any hard, what I called hard drugs or LSD or anything of that nature but
20 we did have some occasional pot use I guess, go up and smoke a joint up on the roof,
21 watch the fire fight at night and the lights of Saigon, that was about it but it was amazing,
22 it sure was very prevalent there. I think you paid maybe a dollar or two bucks for a pack
23 of weed.

24 RV: I assume it did not get in the way of your job?

25 TA: No. Even out in the field, there may have been one or two guys that might
26 have smoked a joint in the field and I can only think of one or two guys that possibly ever
27 did that but none of them, I mean the guy was serious. I'd say of the majority of our guys
28 in our unit were very, very serious about their work. We had some guys that drank
29 considerably and the me that was; they were in rougher shape than the guys that smoked
30 dope at night. I just, I cannot think really of anybody that actually took some grass out in
31 the filed and smoked except for possibly one or two guys in our unit. And again I was

1 there through the end of '69, I knew of no one that was doing any hard drugs at all and I
2 can't, I just can't think of anybody that would have been doing that.

3 RV: Concerning entertainment and recreation, how about music, did that play a
4 part in your days?

5 TA: Oh, yes we used to go to the library at Tan Son Nhut and we would, we all
6 had through the PX, we always had a, somebody in our unit would buy a brand new teak
7 our a Sansui tape recorder and we'd go over at, they had machines that we could record
8 new needle drops over there, record off of music and put it on a reeled seven and half
9 inch, seven IPS reel to reel player and at that time that was the most sophisticated way to
10 play music. We all had our own speakers and somebody in the room always had a unit,
11 like my first time over I don't think I bought anything in Thailand but when I got to
12 Vietnam I did buy some speakers and an amplifier and a tuner and the next time over I
13 bought a reel to reel and possibly a turntable.

14 RV: What songs come to mind when you think about those times?

15 TA: Oh, I was recording Beatles, The Doors, Mamas and the Papas, that type of
16 thing.

17 RV: Okay, how much contact did you have with home?

18 TA: Well, I had, my uncle worked for the telephone company in Flint, Michigan
19 and he was, it had something to do, he would occasionally get a phone call over to me in
20 Vietnam and patch in my parents and that was maybe once or twice during my stay, the
21 three or four months stay that I had and that happened I think on tow stays when I was
22 over there. It was letters from home and that type of thing, that's how we communicated
23 basically, so really fortunate to have those two. I know after I got hit I was out of the
24 country within several days after that and when I got back to Hawaii the first phone call I
25 made was to my parents to tell them everything. I said, "You might be getting something
26 from the Army saying I've been wounded and I just didn't want to scare you" I said, "it
27 was just a flesh wound, I just wanted you to understand that I'm okay." And other than
28 that, I think that was the only other ways. And again you were asking about other
29 entertainment, we'd go down into Saigon and there were some great French restaurants
30 that we would occasionally go to, it wasn't a weekly experience but maybe once a month
31 or three times, three or four times while I was there we would go down and do that. Oh,

1 the other funny thing that we would do for entertainment, it was really fun I mean, we'd
2 go to the Five O'clock Follies, I don't know if you ever heard of that.

3 RV: Yes, sir.

4 TA: Okay, well a number of us would go down to the Five O'clock Follies and sit
5 in the back and laugh.

6 RV: Why don't you go ahead and describe it for those listening who won't know
7 what that is.

8 TA: Oh, the Five O'clock Follies was a daily briefing, I believe it was at the Rex
9 Hotel and it was the, somebody telling the press about what went on in Vietnam for the
10 last twenty-four hours and it was basically just a press briefing and a couple of officers
11 would stand up and talk about all of the gains that we made and the big thing then was
12 body counts. Now to give you an example, I mentioned earlier I flew with my uncle and
13 we lit up a bunker complex along a river in South Vietnam, in the delta and I thin there
14 were five bunkers. Well he actually had a little book that he could go to and after the F-
15 104s went in and destroyed the bunker complex, size of bunker, location of bunker, what
16 the bunker looked like, he could tell exactly how many people were killed in there. And
17 of course he had to put that in as a, in his report and whenever there was combat or any
18 type of action happening in Vietnam there was an after combat report sent somewhere
19 and so this after combat report, be it from my uncle who was a forward air controller or
20 from a captain that engaged in the enemy with a tank squad, these reports would filter
21 back as fast as they could to headquarters, MACV headquarters and then that information
22 was disseminated to this press conference at the Rex Hotel. And it was laughable how
23 many people we supposedly killed every day, the body count was such a big deal for the
24 U.S. government, it was such an exaggerated account that nobody believed it and how we
25 were winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese was the other issue and a lot of us,
26 you know if I'd been there my first time I might have believed some of this, but after
27 being there two times and traveling from one end of Vietnam to the other I just thought it
28 was pretty funny.

29 RV: Do you think others in attendance, the press and the non-DASPO guys or the,
30 everyone else, do you think they had the same feeling that this was laughable?

1 TA: Oh, absolutely, there was, I don't know who they were trying to sell this to
2 but nobody was buying. The dogs didn't like the dog food.

3 RV: Why do you think the government did that?

4 TA: Oh I think they did that to justify their position in Vietnam, either needing
5 more troop strength or more equipment, more money and this was their way of trying to
6 let the American public know how the war was coming along. Now, to be honest with
7 you even during Tet and the second Tet Offensive we decimated the VC and we certainly
8 hurt the NVA very badly but we'd been telling, again it goes back to these Five O'clock
9 Follies, how they'd been telling the American press show well we'd been doing and how
10 we had control of certain areas and everything else, they became their own worst enemy
11 because their lies finally caught up with them and it was a turning point in the war. Not
12 because, I mean we really, really battered the enemy but the enemy showed that what
13 we'd been telling them was certainly a bunch of BS and so this continued on. They never
14 really, I don't think they ever really understood the marketing of the war if you will. And
15 of course with the press being able to go anywhere, not just being embedded with one
16 unit, if one unit wasn't doing anything the press could jump from there and go
17 somewhere else and actually verify what was happening. So again we did have a good
18 time going down there for a few laughs, then we'd go to the Continental Hotel and have a
19 couple of drinks and maybe head back to the villa and have a late dinner or something.
20 But that was, I mean, I'm trying to think of any other things. We'd listen to music and
21 like I said play cards and, you have to understand there was a lot of times we were out of
22 the villa and the times back were probably, I'd say we probably spent two thirds of the
23 time out of the villa.

24 RV: Did you keep up with news back in the United States?

25 TA: The only way we could do that was *Stars and Stripes* and again we got a
26 biased paper there. We really, but when I got back to Hawaii see I was able to catch right
27 back up to where things were and be able to compare. We really could get a grip and an
28 understanding of what was going on. We had AFVN and Armed Forces Vietnam radio
29 and television, which we got and we had the *Stars and Stripes*, and that was it but being
30 able to go back to Hawaii as frequently as we did, we got a pretty real picture of what
31 was happening in the world.

1 RV: Let me ask you more of a personal question, did your spiritual beliefs change
2 or alter any because of the war or during the war?

3 TA: You know what I think I became a fatalist.

4 RV: Really?

5 TA: A true fatalist, yes and it still carries over to this day.

6 RV: Why did that happen?

7 TA: Well, I think if my time was up over there it was going to be up and I
8 certainly had a couple of instances not only in Vietnam but the one I mentioned in Korea
9 as well and I just became a true fatalist and after seeing men killed, both Vietnamese and
10 Americans I really just said if its going to be, its going to be and I carried that all the way
11 through. And as far as a belief in God, I don't think that changed any as far as being able
12 to say that I was more religious or prayed more in Vietnam than I do now, probably not.

13 RV: Could you make some comments on the enemy, what you, some general
14 impressions of the NVA and VC and then perhaps strengths and weaknesses of both?

15 TA: Well the enemy were, I mean, I think they wrote the book on guerilla war, I
16 mean they were very, very hard to pin down to ever really actually fight with when it was
17 our advantage, we fought them when it was their advantage. And I mean they just had,
18 they had also the, I think they had the backing of the peasants and if they didn't they were
19 brutal; they had no qualms about killing people to make them understand their point.
20 There was a lot of things I thought about Vietnam, I felt that Vietnam one day would be a
21 united country under communism, I felt that the South would probably corrupt the North
22 some day and I just, I really felt that they enemy was, especially the NVA, they really
23 were, they had a true belief, I mean it was like to me I would say it was probably like our
24 Revolutionary War. They believed that that was their country, I mean how many men
25 can you think of that would walk a bicycle hundred and hundreds of miles and carry just
26 enough ammunition for several rounds to go out and turn around and go back and get
27 some more. And they were tough; they wanted to win that war. And that inherent belief
28 that they had carried over and we were there and I think our failed policy was sending
29 people back after one year, I really feel that once we got to understand how to fight these
30 guys, all the experience that we had gained left and I remember reading *We Were*
31 *Soldiers* once, when Hal Moore was right in the middle of the first, biggest firefight,

1 Westmoreland wanted him to be pulled out so he could just give Westmoreland a briefing
2 and again that was typical, that was just typical, I really felt that guys like Westmoreland
3 was a constant politician, he wasn't a soldier's soldier, he didn't understand or get the
4 grip on what was going on, of course he was influenced by politicians in our country as
5 well, his hands were tied. I think it; you know that went all the way down, that was just
6 the wrong way to fight that war. And had we had the support like we did in Desert Storm
7 and this last conflict where we could go after the enemy I think it would have been a
8 different story.

9 RV: Do you think there was a crisis of leadership on the part of the United States
10 and Vietnam?

11 TA: Oh there's not question in my mind there was, I mean it was just a huge crisis
12 in leadership and its like with any unit, even with our unit we had some people that were
13 so-called leaders, they were put into a leadership position and they had no vision. You
14 know that's the one thing, they had no idea where we were going to go, they had no plan
15 for where do you to see DASPO go now and I think because of that is one of the reasons
16 that DASPO collapsed. But getting back, I Mean the North Vietnamese soldiers were
17 tough, very tough, I don't know if that answers your question or not.

18 RV: Yes, sir.

19 TA: You know a lot of, I told you about my cousin, I went back down tot he Delta
20 quite a few times and I just enjoyed going down there and being with him and some of
21 the Air Force guys and that was, I did that on my days off, but I would go down and
22 shoot it and send the film off to Washington, I also filmed, and I've got it on some film
23 that I'll be giving to Texas Tech, that I had processed myself, there were several doctors
24 that just gave of their time when they had any time off, they would do surgical
25 procedures for the Vietnamese. One woman had a clavicle that was shattered by shrapnel,
26 I filmed that operation and actually the doctor did the whole procedure himself, he had no
27 help. I think Bud, my cousin helped him hold some instruments and had him some
28 instruments and that was about it but like I said when we weren't typing captions we
29 were either playing basketball or poker or making runs to the commissary and we hung
30 out at the gate and there are always a few ladies coming by and asking us if we wanted
31 anything besides marijuana and guys out there trying to sell dirty pictures of their sister.

1 We had a few of our guys that actually partook of these gals and fell in love with them
2 even.

3 RV: Really?

4 TA: Yes, I think that was maybe their first love of their life, I think one or two
5 even married a couple of gals that they met over there. You know Saigon was a pretty
6 city, I mean it really was, in its day it was really great. I mean there were a lot of scars in
7 it when I had gotten there but you could just tell by the way that streets were lined with
8 trees, the architecture, when you got down into downtown Saigon it was very French and
9 I enjoyed going down there. I went down to the cathedral a few times, attended mass and
10 I enjoyed going down and just looking at the city, but I just, I don't know I never really
11 felt comfortable with the people of Vietnam then. And I say then because I've been back
12 and I have a whole different feeling for them.

13 RV: Do you want to describe that feeling, what has changed?

14 TA: Oh, I think their philosophies have changed a lot even though they're so-
15 called "under communist socialism" you talk about guys that are really hungry for work
16 and willing to do anything now, I mean it just changed, the whole generation difference.
17 Really was, oh the people there were very, very friendly and outgoing, and I think even
18 some of the people that were carryovers from the war, there was no, it just didn't seem
19 like there was any animosity towards Americans there at all. I know we had a guide and
20 one of the reasons, he said "You know we fought the Chinese for three hundred years" he
21 said, "We fought you guys for approximately twenty-five years and the French before
22 you, you guys were like a mosquito on a water buffalo compared to what we did with the
23 Chinese." So that was one of the differences and I just felt, I felt very welcome and I
24 never felt that somebody was doing something behind my back as I did before. You
25 remember I was telling you about a couple of guys, we had a couple of other guys in our
26 unit that would, we had two real wild men, one guy, his name was Dan Bower, he got a,
27 some kind of, he convinced the doctors that he had a skin condition and he got some kind
28 of a deal where the doctors would let him have a beard. So Dan had a beard and this
29 Talmadge B. Harverson I mentioned earlier grew his hair real long and both these guys
30 would sleep with hairnets at night, keep their hair down when they would get up in the
31 morning. These two guys went out the Big Red One, first infantry division, they would

1 catch a ride out of Tan Son Nhut and when we would take them out and drop them off,
2 they would change out of their, their Army fatigues, the jungle fatigues, all they had on
3 their was DASPO and their name in black, so there really wasn't any recognition but they
4 would change out of those into a white T-shirt and a pair of bellbottom pants okay, and
5 they would jump on a plane with their cameras. And the two of them, as the day went on
6 their hair got springier too and so I'm sure they just kind of combed it out, so they had the
7 long hair, Bower with his beard, whit T-shirt, bellbottom pants, they're walking down the
8 road into the Big Red One and who comes by them then the commanding general and he
9 had the driver turn around and swing back and wanted to know who these two hippies
10 were working for, what news organization would let these two hippies.

11 RV: Did they say DASPO?

12 TA: Well, they had to eventually and of course the phone call went to Saigon,
13 Saigon to, our phone call went to Saigon, the general's phone call went to Washington
14 DC and these two guys were kicked out of Vietnam.

15 RV: Really?

16 TA: Yes, and I said there's only about a half a million other guys that would have
17 liked to have traded places with them, I think they got Articles Fifteens and busted a
18 grade and I said geez, how many guys would have loved to have that happen to them,
19 right. So that was kind of a, that was kind of an interesting story with the guys in DC
20 were climbing all over the major that was, I think it was Friend then who was the major
21 and he just got nailed by Washington, I'm sure he got ripped and of course that was
22 passed on to a real nice guy that was first lieutenant who happened to be the officer in
23 charge. Well anyway, I think one of the last combat assignments I had was another search
24 and destroy in I Corps in November, again I was with the 101st Airborne near Con Tien
25 and the mission was blowing up bunkers that had been spotted and you know I didn't
26 know how they were going to do this and I just figured some C-4 and that would be it.
27 Well they were using sacks, like cement sacks and these cement sacks were filled with
28 tear gas, it was a powder and they would take that in and then blow the bunkers, they'd
29 detonate that with the C-4. Well every hole through these tunnels that stuff would seep
30 through and it would drift up in the air. Well nobody tell me to bring a gas mask or
31 anything on this mission, I'm telling you I had just, my eyes were running, snot was

1 coming down my face and I could hardly see and like I was moving away from this stuff
2 coming out of these bunkers, what do I run into a bramble bush and it just ripped me
3 apart and there were red ants all over it. I said, the heat, the gear, the tear gas, the red
4 ants, I said, "What a great day" but I think they blew up about fifteen bunkers before we
5 had to return to base camp and we never ran into anyone at that assignment. Let's see
6 another one I had was back up into Phu Bai again and this was one of those great
7 assignments where we went to an island about ten miles off the coast of Hue and I'd been
8 reading about this group in Stars and Stripes and I went up to CO and proposed that we
9 do a shoot on this. And it was one Air Force man, a Marine Seabee, an Army guy and a
10 Navy guy, it was like four guys and there might have been two of each, I'm not exactly
11 sure but they were on this island to help rebuild the island infrastructure and they would
12 ask the village elders what they wanted to do and he said, "Well, we need a bridge to get
13 across this river because it would really help us." Well instead of them just giving them
14 the money and watching it disappear they actually bought the money with the people; the
15 Vietnamese and the Vietnamese built the bridge. I mean they actually had them building
16 things and doing things and these guys were like really heroes to the people of this island.
17 And I had a guy named Stu Barbie go with me on this, Stu had been I think about six
18 weeks in the morgue, he was doing a job, they needed a training film on how we were
19 identifying bodies and Stu had been in there for six weeks doing this and it was a
20 gruesome job so I said, "I'd like to take Stu with me on this" and so the CO let us go.
21 And he was, I mean Stu was so happy to get out of there; it really, really affected him.
22 We had another guy, Bert Peterson who spent weeks in there and it never affected him, I
23 mean it was just a job but Stu it really, I mean it really bothered him. I mean ever night he
24 had to light up on the roof and just smoked until he could finally fall asleep and to this
25 day that graves registration project still haunts him. But we left Saigon and it was a great
26 day and they took us a, we got up to Hue, we choppered over to this island and it was just
27 a beautiful day and they showed us what projects they had planned and what they were
28 doing and we said, Well we were going to stay up there and we were going to film, you
29 know where we were going to start and where was the sun coming up and that type of
30 thing, so we figured that evening exactly where we were going to shoot. Well the next
31 morning we woke up and it was just raining cats and dogs, I mean it was just a monsoon

1 and it rained for a straight week there, we never shot one frame of film the entire time we
2 were there. But we had a great rest and recreation one week, it was one week I didn't have
3 to go out into the boonies and film some other little combat operation so it wasn't too
4 bad. I mean these guys made homemade doughnuts every morning and I caught up on, I
5 think I read *Lord of the Rings* while I was up there. That was my last assignment and one
6 other interesting thing, the village priest decided to have us over for dinner one night and
7 it was a feast but we got, being the guests of honor, they passed around this silver bowl
8 that had a top on it and they passed it to us and Stu and I opened up the, to eat it, and it
9 was boiled chicken heads and here you had a nice little old chicken head looking at you
10 and the idea was to pick it up by the beak and, oh god.

11 RV: And you had to do something with it because it would be disrespectful.

12 TA: Okay. After I got back I went to, I came back to Saigon for one day and then
13 I left for Hong Kong. I got back and I had to spend two more days there with Peter Friend
14 and he was the, he was the then, like I said had been elevated to the commanding officer
15 of DASPO Pac and he told me at that point in time I needed to get a haircut, which I did I
16 went out and got a haircut, I was just about ready to get out to the Army and I'd come
17 back from that and he had, I came back about nine o'clock, he said "I thought I told you
18 to get a haircut?" And I said, "Oh, I did, sir." He says, "Well, you're going to get a better
19 haircut when you get back to Hawaii." I mean this guy was really an unusual person.
20 When he was the OIC of the group before he became the commanding officer we had this
21 little eating area and the floor was like a tile, marble tile and every time you would move
22 your chair, the chair would squeak. Well he just would go nuts and make the guy stop,
23 not move, I know on this last trip that he came in on, he screamed at us and I think he
24 even ate some of his meals in his room. But he was, I think he, he had gone through the
25 Army, he was an enlisted man to begin with and he had gone through the National Guard
26 and somewhere the in the National Guard he was made an officer, he was an enlisted man
27 to begin with. Other officers that knew him a lot a heck of a lot better than I knew him
28 said the guy had an inferiority complex big time and one of the officers that lived with
29 him caught him one morning when he thought everybody was out of his shared apartment
30 complex saying over and over again in front of a mirror, "Why doesn't anybody like
31 me?"

1 RV: Really?

2 TA: And well he knew why guys didn't like him prior, the guys that were there
3 prior to 1968 and that had to do with Rick Ryan but he really, he really had a complex
4 and before he came to Vietnam he had gotten word that we were trading in huge amounts
5 of grass, we were supposed to have tons of it at the villa somehow and one night we were
6 watching a movie with and Captain Richards who was the CO over in Thailand came
7 barging into the villa, unannounced and he had us all come downstairs immediately at the
8 dining room table and he inspected the villa for the stash of grass. Of course he went to
9 the CONEX containers, there was just nothing but tools in there and then he went through
10 everybody's lockers and drawers and everything and I think he came up with one pack of
11 grass was all he found. Later we discovered that this was some theory that our new CO
12 had concocted but he was really directing it at one guy that he felt was real hippie and he
13 really wanted to make an example of him after this thing happened with Dan Bower and
14 Harverson getting busted and he was going to make an example of this guy but as it
15 turned out it was an illegal search and nothing could have even happened to him. But I
16 think our OIC Bert Harris was replaced because of that and because of the two guys that
17 were busted for wearing those clothes, and a another really good guy, Captain Edmund
18 Wiston was sent there and he ended up getting screwed over by this Major Friend as well.
19 But I know Captain Richards picked me up in Hawaii when I got back the first thing he
20 said to me was that Major Friend had called him all the way from Saigon to inform him
21 that he was to make sure I got a haircut when I got back as well.

22 RV: Really?

23 TA: Yes, I said wow what a waste of money that is. And guys that came in after
24 me said that this guy had them washing and polishing the office floors in our office where
25 we did all of our training and they had civilian contractors that were doing that and he
26 just wanted to, you know play Army and I just also felt that you know if this guy, he
27 could have been Major Burns in MASH, the only difference was that Major Burns had a
28 personality.

29 RV: It sounds like he was tough, or tough to exist with I should say.

30 TA: No, he wasn't tough the just was a very odd guy. He would always have the
31 first sergeant do anything that was the dirty work, he never did anything, he would never

1 confront anybody himself but the thing I really felt that he never really had a plan for
2 DASPO and what we were going to do and he just became a real politician and that's all
3 it was. We had some guys that came into DASPO that were looking for promotions as
4 well that had their own agenda and it all hurt DASPO but I sure enjoyed my time with it,
5 I mean it was really great. I couldn't wait to get back into college but I was really focused
6 on getting back to school, getting my degree and looking forward to graduate school.

7 RV: So why did you get out of the Army, was it just you did your two years and
8 that was it?

9 TA: No, I was in three. I really enjoyed what I did, there's no question about it but
10 I mean I really had a, after being in the Army and after being in college I mean I really
11 couldn't wait to get back to school and I know the last, I think I was back there for three
12 weeks after I got back from Hong Kong, three or four weeks and I mean the only thing
13 for us to do was screen footage that was coming in and critique and I mean we were
14 really avoiding the office and I know I just couldn't wait to get out. I wanted to get back
15 to school. The Army sure made, even as great of a job I had in DASPO I just couldn't
16 wait. I mean when I was with DASPO I felt that our, I accomplished an awful lot, had a
17 lot of things on network news, as I mentioned I was cinematographer of the year and I
18 think I was nominated for that for six different times but I really couldn't wait to take
19 what I learned there and expound on it and that's what I thought I did. I left DASPO
20 December 26, 1969, day after Christmas and I was back in college in ten days. I got out
21 as an E-5. I look back at DASPO now and I really didn't understand what a really a
22 special group we were in and the history we covered. I mean I knew some of it but I
23 mean I still really didn't realize it. I remember ten years after I got out of DASPO I was
24 sitting at an airport waiting for my red eye flight back to Michigan and I was watching a
25 show on TV, it may have been PBS, I'm not sure but it was the one thousand day war and
26 what pops up was a whole bunch of scenes I had shot. I'm looking at this, I'm going
27 wow, what a strange feeling, I wanted to say, "hey, that's something that I shot" but I
28 think back then nobody really cared. It was interesting seeing that. I know, you know we
29 went to that, we went to a reunion this year in Washington DC of 2002 in October and we
30 went to the 55th Combat Camera Group at Fort Meade, in Washington DC and the
31 cameraman in this group, they had the greatest year you could possibly have, they even

1 had satellite phones to get the problems out, but their chain of command, I couldn't
2 believe it, I mean that was one of the things that we were very fortunate with. I mean we
3 could never be biased and we could go anywhere we wanted. I mean these guys were at a
4 brigade level and they really had a hard time, would have had a hard time getting around,
5 even you know since Vietnam other than this latest war the press never really got a
6 chance to go in the field like they did in Vietnam, the Gulf War coverage was limited and
7 so was Afghanistan. I mean these guys were embedded but they couldn't leave once they
8 were embedded, they couldn't leave and go to another area and I often wondered what
9 happened with the 55th Combat Camera Company, how much they go to go and see and
10 what they were directed to do because they didn't have the flexibility or the power that
11 we had. I think DASPO did a great job covering the Vietnam War and when I talk to
12 other veterans I tell them what we accomplished and what they did and they still can't
13 believe what we did, I mean many of us, we're still friends, we still can maintain really
14 close relationships that were what, thirty-five years ago and yes, we just enjoyed that.

15 RV: That's a very special relationship you formed with these guys.

16 TA: Yes. Well after I felt DASPO I did finish my degree at the University of
17 Wisconsin, Milwaukee and then I got my Master's Degree there as well and I taught
18 some classes there, I taught a cinematography class and I also taught an English class that
19 film was adopted from novels. I worked for seven years as a producer of national
20 commercials back here in Detroit and then I've owned my own production company for
21 the last twenty-three years, doing film and music production for just about every division
22 of General Motors, Chrysler, Nissan, Honda and Acura to name a few. And the last thing
23 I, the last one of my accomplishments, I'm still on the board at Henry Ford Hospital
24 Heart and Vascular Institute and I chaired that for three of the years that I've been on the
25 board. So I've got three kids and two still in college and one working in the advertising
26 field.

27 RV: Let me ask you a couple questions about, general questions about your
28 experience in Vietnam. First of all do you feel that you have experienced any disabilities
29 or kind of PTSD type incidents since you left Southeast Asia?

30 TA: None, whatsoever. I think I had one dream, maybe twelve years ago and that
31 was it, that's the only dream I've ever had, any flashbacks, anything to do with Vietnam.

1 RV: How did you deal with seeing so much death and destruction, especially the
2 death of young American boys?

3 TA: Oh, I think it was just death of anybody, I mean our citizens number one but I
4 guess I got very hardened and very, I'm trying to think of the correct word, I just like I
5 said I became such a fatalist after seeing all of that, not to say that it, and it bothered me
6 and I still you know, if I dwell on it I guess it could bother me but I've never stopped to
7 really dwell on the death, I mean I looked at it as a waste of our people and was too bad
8 that going back to, oh I guess at the end of World War II when we supported the French
9 in colonizing Vietnam and we went against the wishes of basically the UN. I mean I
10 really never realized much of this until after I got out of the Army and really started
11 reading about the history of Vietnam and reading some of the books that had been written
12 about Vietnam, how the politics worked and what was going on at the time.

13 RV: So you did read about it and try to understand it more.

14 TA: Oh, yes, yes and I still like to read books about Vietnam and not just Vietnam
15 but all Asia, but Vietnam particularly still really interests me, just to find out more and
16 why we did what we did. I mean I saved a lot of information about Vietnam because I
17 like to read it; I like to go back and still see what things were said and see where things
18 maybe possibly could have gone right instead of going wrong. But I just became very
19 hardened.

20 RV: What do you think the United States could have done differently?

21 TA: Could have done differently?

22 RV: Yes, sir.

23 TA: Well, again I think it all goes back probably to 1945, Ho Chi Minh was
24 certainly a socialist at the time, had not really become a communist and I really believe
25 that Dean Acheson supported the French in keeping Vietnam and some of their other
26 countries around there as a colony and the French preyed on us to do that and we decided
27 to help them. I think if we would have changed course right then and there things would
28 have been different, but be that as it may I think the politicians should have listened to the
29 generals once we decided to go in, put it that simply.

30 RV: What were your impressions of the anti-war movement?

1 TA: Well at the time, at first I thought they were certainly wrong but then after
2 getting back to Hawaii and seeing what was going on in Vietnam I think they, I think
3 after a turning point in Vietnam I think they probably helped shorten the war believe it or
4 not. I certainly didn't like at the beginning where they were doing things but at the end
5 they had their right to make their protest and I guess I still have some ambivalent feelings
6 about what they did. I mean you certainly are over there and you'd certainly like to have
7 some support but what I really didn't like was when we came home from Vietnam and
8 how I felt, how other I think men that served in Vietnam felt as well, there was no
9 appreciation for what we did, what we tried to do.

10 RV: How did you feel?

11 TA: How did I feel personally?

12 RV: Yes, sir.

13 TA: I felt like a outcast, not that people spit on me or anything else but I felt that
14 you know, he was in Vietnam, he must you know there's a stigma and I felt that even in
15 college when I got back.

16 RV: Really?

17 TA: Yes. And some other people thought it was great knowing veterans but I
18 really felt there was a stigma.

19 RV: Do you think the United States population had overcome that stigma or do
20 you think its still there?

21 TA: Oh, I do, I think they did. I think they finally after the first Gulf War I think
22 that was stigma was lifted and appreciation was given for what American veterans did
23 during Vietnam.

24 RV: Do you remember where you were April of '75 when the country fell and
25 how you felt then?

26 TA: Yes, I don't, I know I was back here in Michigan and I knew it was falling
27 and I watched the helicopters pulling people off the embassy and I felt horrible, horrible
28 for the people that got left behind that we said that we were going to help, I thought that
29 was just inconceivable that we didn't have a plan to get those people out of there. I was
30 not surprised at all at how fast it happened, no shock for me that it happened when it

1 happened and actually I was happy to see that it was over with. And I felt no shame for
2 out country because I think our country did the best we possibly could.

3 RV: How do you think the war had most affected your life?

4 TA: Well, it affected me because of what I did over there positively. I mean I was
5 able to take what I did and turn it into a position in life for me as a camera, you know I
6 started out as a cameraman and I became a, I worked my way up to director and producer
7 and its afforded me a very nice living, style of living for my life. And it affected me in
8 that way and it also, I also made some really terrific friends while I was there and those
9 friendships, really its amazing how after all of these years these friendships still continue.

10 RV: Is there anything you would change about your experience in Southeast Asia
11 if you could?

12 TA: Yes, I think knowing what I know now I certainly would have done my job
13 even better, I really would have. I mean there are some things that I could have, I used to
14 say god, I wished I would have known that then, you know and been able to even
15 enhance what we filmed and do other things over there to show what the American
16 soldiers were doing. I just would love to have a second chance to have that knowledge
17 that I learned after Vietnam on filmmaking.

18 RV: Right. Speaking of filmmaking, could you comment on the movies that have
19 come out on Vietnam, do you see those and so what's your opinion?

20 TA: Oh, yes, sure, sure. First one that I saw was *Apocalypse Now*, of course there
21 really wasn't anything truthful about the movie if people were looking at that as how it
22 really was but it sure gave you a sense of the desperation of people and that's what I,
23 from a psychological standpoint I thought it was a pretty good movie. *Deer Hunter* was
24 another psychological type of thing about stereotype again. The one that was really
25 stereotyped I thought was *Platoon*, they threw everything in there they possibly could
26 from fragging to raping young girls to, I mean, it did go on but it certainly, they made it
27 look like it was a common, everyday experience and I thought that movie was a bit
28 exaggerated. Gosh, the last movie I can think of that I've seen on Vietnam was *We Were*
29 *Soldiers Once* and I thought that was fairly realistic, but it still was, it still was
30 Hollywood and it could have even been more realistic I thought but it gave people a little
31 bit of an idea of what was going on. I think probably one of the best films I've seen since,

1 if you're going to talk about war was probably the way Black Hawk Down was filmed, I
2 mean it looked like it was filmed from a documentary standpoint and yet that little
3 incident wouldn't have even made it on the scope for what was going on in Vietnam, I
4 mean that wouldn't have even been a blimp.

5 RV: Have you seen the movie *Eighty-Four Charlie Mopic*?

6 TA: No.

7 RV: It's a Hollywood film but it's supposedly kind of a pseudo documentary of a
8 government motion picture cameraman following around a squad in Vietnam. I was
9 wondering if you had seen it if you could comment on it but if not then.

10 TA: Geez, I've never even heard of it.

11 RV: You should check it out, see what you think.

12 TA: I'm wondering where I can find that, I will.

13 RV: It sounds like something similar to what the DASPO

14 TA: Guys were doing, yes. Like to see that, huh. And there was one other film
15 that was I just going to comment on as well, oh gosh, I can't remember what it was.

16 RV: Was it *Full Metal Jacket*?

17 TA: Yes, that was it, *Full Metal Jacket*. That was a pretty good film.

18 RV: They did have some DASPO guys in there didn't they; they had some
19 footage of American servicemen filming other servicemen.

20 TA: Shooting something, yes, yes. Well and that's basically, I mean that film, that
21 film also was I thought fairly well done and its certainly from an emotional standpoint, it
22 gave a feeling of desperation in Vietnam.

23 RV: Can you make some comments on the overall media coverage of the war?
24 We talked a little bit about your experience with the civilian press in country but overall
25 looking at it, what do you think?

26 TA: Well, for what they did I thought they did a terrific job actually. I mean there
27 were some guys that ended up losing their lives covering that war, men and women. I
28 don't know if you have ever seen the book *Requiem*?

29 RV: Yes, sir.

30 TA: Well, I mean there's a perfect example. These people were doing what they
31 thought was the best job they could do and they did it. I think the media basically did a

1 fairly good job covering the war although I do still think they were somewhat liberally
2 biased in their reporting but looking at what the other side was doing as far as bias I think
3 they counteracted each other because the Army certainly, when I say the Army, the
4 Department of Defense was certainly, was being biased in Vietnam, MACV, they really,
5 General Westmoreland's group really slanted the news to their favor and so I think the
6 press was slanting it the other way and I think somewhere in between they kind of met.

7 RV: Okay. If you had to talk a group of young people today about Vietnam, what
8 would you tell them; I mean to these guys, this group of people Vietnam's ancient
9 history.

10 TA: Oh, yes.

11 RV: What would you say to them?

12 TA: Well, I would try to tell them a little bit about the history of Vietnam, talk
13 about the French a little bit, very little because I didn't understand or read a great deal
14 about all of the French involvement in it and tell them about how the Gulf of Tonkin
15 incident really got us involved in it and how the troops ramped up and then tell them a
16 little bit about my experience in it. I would basically talk about my experiences because
17 those are the ones I really know the most.

18 RV: Have you had any contact with Vietnamese here in the United States?

19 TA: No.

20 RV: How many times have you been back to Vietnam?

21 TA: Only once.

22 RV: Do you want to go back any more?

23 TA: Absolutely I want to go back, yes.

24 RV: What would you do?

25 TA: Well, I want to go to some other places besides Saigon; I want to experience
26 some of the other areas. I really would and I'd also like to get a little flavor of the north. I
27 understand Hanoi is doing gang busters, I know when we were in South Vietnam in
28 Saigon or Ho Chi Minh City, but everybody there still calls it Saigon, I was aghast that
29 nothing has really happened. It really has been, in the years, I mean I look at Bangkok
30 for example and Bangkok looks a little bit like what Hong Kong looks like, with towering
31 skyscrapers everywhere, huge amounts of commerce and then I look at Saigon and it was

1 really, there has been hardly any new building there. Free trade is not happening there
2 and these people want to work and make some money and the old guard, and they're still
3 the old guard, until they die I don't think anything much is going to happen there and I
4 still think they're punishing the South Vietnamese as well from the North because Hanoi
5 is pretty much booming from what people tell me and these are people that I trust because
6 they're CNN people that have been both places and they're saying Hanoi is a great town
7 and lots of industry there, but not much in the south.

8 RV: Have you ever been to the memorial in Washington DC?

9 TA: Yes.

10 RV: What was your experience like there?

11 TA: I worried about it for years, I avoided it like the plague, I did not want to go
12 there.

13 RV: Why?

14 TA: I was just afraid I was going to have an emotional breakdown, seeing one of
15 my best friend's name on the Wall, I really felt that I just didn't want to be around
16 anybody when I went there. I just can't tell you how apprehensive I was and I did go and
17 I was glad to, we went with our reunion group and I'm glad we did, there was a lot of
18 emotional support there. I just dreaded going there and if we hadn't had that reunion I
19 probably wouldn't have gone. The first reunion that we had was in DC and I actually was
20 working on a job and I could not get there and I wasn't unhappy that I couldn't go
21 because I dreaded going to the Wall and seeing not just Rick's name but the fifty
22 thousand other names there. It's very dramatic; it's a very quiet, dramatic spot. I think the
23 design of that, it was just phenomenal.

24 RV: Well sir is there anything else that you'd like to add to our conversations
25 we've had the past two days?

26 TA: I think that's enough, don't you?

27 [Both laugh]

28 RV: I don't know if it's ever enough.

29 TA: Yes, I'm sure there's twenty million other things that I could think of at some
30 other time, but at least you get kind of a flavor of my experience in DASPO and in the
31 Army in Vietnam. I hope it helps.

- 1 RV: It does. Let me go ahead and sign off. This will end the interview with Mr.
- 2 Theodore Acheson. Thank you very much, sir.
- 3 TA: Oh, you're welcome.