

**The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Project  
Interview with Michael Ward  
Conducted by Stephen Maxner  
April 19, May 9, 2003; July 2, 2003  
Transcribed by Mindy Moser**

1 Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Mike  
2 Ward on the nineteenth of April 2003 at approximately 12:25. We are in Charlottesville,  
3 Virginia, at the Sleep Inn conference room. Sir, first, thanks for consenting to this  
4 interview. Why don't we go ahead and begin with a discussion of your early life? Just  
5 tell me when and where you were born and where you grew up.

6 Michael Ward: I was born January 28<sup>th</sup>, '45 in Kansas City, Missouri. I stayed in  
7 Kansas City until I was about fourteen years old. My father died when I was ten. At  
8 fourteen my mother went to work as a district sales manager for Avon and we moved to  
9 Poplar Bluff, Missouri, which was in the boot heel of Missouri. Went to high school in  
10 Poplar Bluff. My mother told me I was living in a peach orchard and didn't know it and  
11 she was probably right. It was a very nice—had a good childhood. Went to high school  
12 in Poplar Bluff and played football and met my first wife, childhood sweetheart, Jennifer.  
13 She was thirteen and I was fifteen when we met. We actually—I was twenty-one and she  
14 was eighteen when we got married. After high school I went to Georgia Tech in Atlanta.  
15 I studied chemical engineering there. Actually I received three deferments, draft  
16 deferments during the Vietnam era. I graduated from Georgia Tech in December, in  
17 three and a half years. Actually I went to school year round, twelve months out of the  
18 year and got out in three and a half years.

19 SM: Were they quarters or semester?

20 MW: Quarters or semesters, actually.

21 SM: Okay.

22 MW: So I started in the summer right after high school and went straight through  
23 and worked on a cooperative education program where I worked part of the time.

1     Actually, that's why I ended up going to Georgia Tech. I could work in my field and go  
2     to school.

3             SM: Who did you work for?

4             MW: Subagagi, a Japanese chemical company. I worked in their R&D (research  
5     and development) department.

6             SM: Wow. Any specific area of chemical engineering in R&D?

7             MW: No. At that time you were just kind of a grunt doing little odds and ends  
8     and nothing real specific. Just learning the basic tools of the trade and pilot plant  
9     development and that kind of thing.

10            SM: Did they focus on any specific form of engineering or manufacturing?

11            MS: Well, Subagagi is a huge chemical company and we're quite a bit on the  
12    pharmaceutical side but nothing specifically. It was a way to gain some general  
13    experience and to make, at that time, a nice little sum of money to help me through  
14    school and got credit for it. It was one of the few schools that did that. That's for sure  
15    why I went to Georgia Tech. So I got out in late December.

16            SM: What year?

17            MW: That would have been '66 and seven days later reported for draft.

18            SM: Oh my goodness.

19            MW: At that point in time, I think most people had absolutely no comprehension  
20    of how the draft worked. It was on a quota basis. Your draft board was given a number  
21    and they had to go deep in the pools. They had to go to get that number. This was the  
22    Poplar Bluff, Missouri, pool I was drafted out of because that's where I registered. I  
23    remember on the bus going after the induction—I was inducted in St. Louis, Missouri—  
24    and I remember there was a guy on the bus that was married with a child. I remember  
25    there were three people there that were actually still in college. So deferment only put  
26    you in a chronological order, not an absolute must. So that made me feel a little bit  
27    better. I went to Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, for basic training.

28            SM: Okay. Let me take you back a little bit, some follow-up questions regarding  
29    your—if you don't feel comfortable talking about this just let me know. Your father  
30    dying when you were so young, how did that impact you most? Besides the obvious, I  
31    mean, losing your dad.

1           MW: Yeah. My mother was very strong. She was not prepared to do what she  
2 had to do, but she did what she had to do. I mean, like you say, other than the obvious, I  
3 don't think it was more traumatic for me than it was anybody else and I don't think it  
4 changed a whole lot of things. I think—I had two older brothers, have two older brothers  
5 and they made some mistakes and gave my mother some problems that she didn't need  
6 and probably made me be a better person because I saw I didn't want to give her that  
7 grief that they gave her. Not that it was all that bad, but you know, my brother selling my  
8 dad's golf clubs.

9           SM: Oh goodness.

10          MW: You know, so little things like that and just realized there's better ways to  
11 do things. So I think it helped give me a little integrity and a work ethic. But we grew up  
12 in an incredibly, incredibly loving family where there was never a harsh word between  
13 my parents that we were aware of if it happened. My mother to this day swears that there  
14 wasn't ever a harsh word, very stern discipline. My father died of lung cancer. He  
15 smoked one carton of cigarettes a day, a carton of Lucky Strikes or Camels. He would  
16 light up one time in the morning. Light one cigarette in the morning and then light one  
17 cigarette after another. I remember him smoking two or three packs of cigarettes in the  
18 evening before I went to bed. So he got lung cancer. I remember an instance after he'd  
19 had one lung removed and was home, maybe weighed a hundred and ten pounds or  
20 something. It was in the morning time and my mother had fixed something for breakfast  
21 and I didn't like it. Whether it was oatmeal and I wanted cereal or vice versa, it didn't  
22 matter. I talked back to my mother and he drug himself out of bed and took me by the  
23 scruff of my neck and took me downstairs and gave me a sharp whipping with a belt and  
24 reminded me that I should never talk to my mother like that and crawled back upstairs  
25 and crawled to get back in bed.

26          SM: Oh my goodness.

27          MW: So we came from a pretty strong disciplined family. We got our butt  
28 beaten when we needed to get our butt beat and was spoiled rotten by my father. My  
29 father was an orphan and he absolutely—my dad was the first person, we were the first  
30 person on the street to have a television. We were the first. We had an ultrasonic door

1 opener on our garage in the early '50s. Where it was a whistle actually that made it work.  
2 We had the first Polaroid camera. My dad was a big gadget freak.

3 SM: What did he do for work?

4 MW: My father was a classical entrepreneur. Where he made his most money is  
5 he made turf boards and calculating boards. I'm sure you've seen the movie *The Sting*  
6 where the bookies are writing up on the chalkboards results of the races? He made those  
7 boards and sold them to the bookies. The interesting part was when they made these  
8 boards, they basically would buy a blackboard. They had a machine that made the oak  
9 frame that went around it and they had stencils where they would stencil. They had  
10 football, baseball, basketball boards and after they stenciled the lines on the board, the  
11 last thing they would do was spray a coat of shellac over the board. If you think about a  
12 blackboard with shellac on it, it's slick. You can't write on slick anything. Well, where  
13 he really made his money on was not selling the blackboards but he sold Belgian chalk,  
14 which was a big square piece of chalk about an inch and a half square that was creamy in  
15 nature. Very soft and it would write on these blackboards. He sold these boxes of chalk  
16 that were about five by five by five for five dollars a box. Now in the late '40s and early  
17 '50s, five dollars was a lot of money, especially in concert where he bought these Belgian  
18 chalk for ten cents a box. To give you an idea of the volume of chalk he sold, I  
19 remember as a pup in Kansas City going down on a Sunday to sign for a barge load of  
20 chalk.

21 SM: A barge?

22 MW: A barge. He sold a lot of chalk. He sold chalk to all the bookies in all the  
23 United States, all over Las Vegas. Later on, my dad, after the Kefauver Act was passed  
24 which made it illegal to transmit horse results over the wire, he got into the advertising  
25 business and was a very creative man. He developed the little light bulb man with the  
26 lighting bolt body, Reddy Kilowatt. That was originally his promotion for the Kansas  
27 City Power and Light. So he was a very creative person and we had a very comfortable  
28 life. We lived very nicely.

29 SM: That is very nice.

30 MW: So how does that effect? You can't—

31 SM: Oh, yeah.

1           MW: But my mother then was an incredibly successful district sales manager for  
2 Avon. She had a hundred and eighty ladies working for her and ended up being I think in  
3 the top quarter or one percent of all Avon managers in the country and was very  
4 successful.

5           SM: Wow. Well, how did that impact you in terms of—it's a little bit early to  
6 talk about this in terms of your post-military career, but you yourself got into business  
7 after your military experience.

8           MW: Yes. I think most people would define me that know me would say that  
9 I'm the classic entrepreneur, risk taker. I continue to constantly take risks and I've been  
10 very lucky.

11          SM: And obviously you got bit by that bug.

12          MW: No. I don't think I got big by the bug. I think I—

13          SM: Brought up in that atmosphere.

14          MW: No, I don't think so.

15          SM: No?

16          MW: I think it's—my mom said that my dad would bet on two cockroaches  
17 going up the side of the wall. In other words, he was a betting person. I'm a betting  
18 person. I'll bet. I'll gamble. Now, the older you get, the more conservative your  
19 gambling becomes and that's how I'm in business. The older I am, the more  
20 conservative my bets in business. But I'm still, literally—if you're a very successful  
21 entrepreneur, you have to be able to gamble everything all the time because if you can't  
22 you won't survive and grow. But with that said, I think it's more of—I think it's  
23 something you're born with and a set of traits. Some of those traits are developed or not  
24 but I think—all of my brothers are entrepreneurs. All of my brothers basically have  
25 never worked for any long periods of time for other people. So I think it's—there are  
26 some learned traits but I think most of them, it's just in your gene pool. That's my  
27 theory.

28          SM: That's very interesting. It did run into not just yourself, but your siblings.

29          MW: Mm-hmm.

30          SM: Okay. Well, as you were growing up in Poplar Bluff, how aware were you  
31 of events going on outside of your immediate community, in particular of course, the

1 major global events. As you were in high school, the Cold War is full swing and we got  
2 all kinds of difficult things going on whether it be the launching of Sputnik, before that of  
3 course, the Hungarian uprising, Khrushchev and his speeches and the antagonism  
4 between him and Kennedy, all kinds of really interesting things. Were you aware of  
5 those types of events growing up?

6 MW: Absolutely not. As I mentioned earlier, my mother said I was in a peach  
7 orchard and didn't know it. My years in high school were strictly with being in high  
8 school, with playing football and going out on Friday night and worried about getting a  
9 full tank of gas that week and needing a set of brakes for my car. Absolutely was in a  
10 world, a very sheltered world, of growing up and getting an average education in a very  
11 average high school environment.

12 SM: What subjects did you gravitate toward in school?

13 MW: Math and sciences. I'm to this day a terrible speller. I was dyslexic. I'm  
14 still dyslexic today. I was terribly dyslexic at a young age and probably hardly could  
15 read until I was maybe eight or nine years old. Then the switch just came on and I caught  
16 right up. Because I came from a comfortable economic family, I had a reading teacher  
17 every summer, a couple hours every day. I just struggled until probably I was ten years  
18 old. I just couldn't—I was at least a couple of grades behind in reading. I just couldn't  
19 read. Of course my spelling skills were terrible. I'm still a poor speller. I'm still a  
20 terrible speller. But about at ten or eleven, about when my dad died, a switch just came  
21 on and I—within a few months I caught back up to my grade level and was just fine and  
22 I've never had any trouble since then. My son—I have two children, a son and a  
23 daughter—and my son was very dyslexic also so it definitely runs in our family. To this  
24 day I have terrible problems with it. Livable.

25 SM: I was just going to say but not too terribly. You're doing all right. Now  
26 how old were you when you got your first job and what did you do?

27 MW: What do you call a job?

28 SM: Well, what was the first time you went out and actually tried to make money  
29 doing something as far as you can recall?

30 MW: Maybe eight or nine years old. They were doing construction in our  
31 neighborhood. I think all my brothers and I, we got in some trouble with the construction

1 people because we lived in a nice area outside of Kansas City. They were starting to  
2 build it up and they were taking our woods over, our playgrounds that we used to run.  
3 We probably got into some mischief in the construction. This is probably back to what  
4 you were saying about influence of my father. He said, "What you boys really need to do  
5 is you need to capitalize on this." "Well, what do you mean?" "You should go help the  
6 workmen and maybe we can do something." Well, he went out and got, as you've seen,  
7 an old metal Coca-cola box and would bring ice and cokes home and we'd put them on a  
8 wagon and pull them down the street and sell cold cokes to the workmen. It was  
9 something to keep us occupied and got us to think that they weren't the bad guys and  
10 taught us how to make some money. So maybe that's a good example my father was  
11 starting to teach us the entrepreneur way of doing things, an entrepreneur way of making  
12 something positive out of a negative. So that was probably the very first thing I thought  
13 of or I can relay. I remember in high school, I had a business selling advertising  
14 specialties, pens and pencils and stuff. I could kind of do it on my own time. Those  
15 kinds of things tend to pay very high commissions. At that time I would make fifteen or  
16 fifty dollars selling something. That was a great deal for me and so I did that. I  
17 remember I started college the first of August at Georgia Tech. In July I set up a  
18 fireworks stand after my senior year in high school and I sold fireworks and made several  
19 hundred dollars. That was a lot of money then over a ten-day period and that was kind of  
20 my seed money to go down to Georgia Tech. Then at Georgia Tech I started doing  
21 things. Yeah, I forgot about that. After my freshman year at Tech, I was visiting a friend  
22 at semester break that was going to medical school in Guadalajara and saw some Tiffany-  
23 style lamps. Now this was like in '61. It was a very new type thing and these were just  
24 the real handmade gorgeous glass light fixtures. I had driven down to Guadalajara and I  
25 came back with half a dozen of these things. I wired them up and I sold them and made  
26 several hundred dollars off of that and said, "Hmm, this is a pretty good deal." So at the  
27 next semester break, I borrowed a pick-up truck, went down there, got a few hundred  
28 bucks together and just brought a pick-up truck load back and started a business selling  
29 Tiffany lamps. By my senior year in college I had a brand new Corvette that was paid  
30 for. I think my tax return my senior year in college was like twenty-five or twenty-eight  
31 thousand dollars.

1 SM: Holy cow. How frequently did you go down to Guadalajara to get more  
2 lamps?

3 MW: Well, by that time I had other people doing it.

4 SM: Okay. So you hired out.

5 MW: Yeah. I'd rent a little building and a storefront in Atlanta actually three or  
6 four blocks off campus and we would wire them up there. Actually, we were selling  
7 mostly directly to light fixture studios in Atlanta, selling a few of them out the front for  
8 retail and doing very well.

9 SM: That is amazing.

10 MW: I went from that into an E1 in the Army.

11 SM: (Laughs) What a horrible experience that would have been.

12 MW: So that was a big shock.

13 MS: Yes, absolutely. When you enrolled in Georgia Tech, did you already know  
14 you wanted to be a chemical engineering major or was that something you fell into?

15 MW: Oh, I think I was guided that way because of test scores and that type thing.  
16 I was strong in math and sciences and weak elsewhere, which probably had something to  
17 do with my dyslexia also. It didn't affect those things quite as much. I don't to this day  
18 don't have much of a problem with numbers but I have a great problem with letters and  
19 mixing them up. But I mix numbers up, too.

20 SM: Given your obvious business bent, I'm surprised that you didn't get into a  
21 business program. Did you think about it?

22 MW: Well, Georgia Tech wasn't a business school.

23 SM: Right. But certainly they offered business classes.

24 MW: Not much.

25 SM: No?

26 MW: No, no.

27 SM: Okay. All right. Well, was there something in particular about chemical  
28 engineering, something that you thought about doing after you graduated with that degree  
29 that you wanted to do? Was there a specific area of chemical engineering you wanted to  
30 get into?



1           MW: I really can't recall right now. It probably had more to do with—it  
2 probably had more to do with scheduling the classes and how it affected my business  
3 doings. (Both laugh)

4           SM: Okay, all right.

5           MW: And Subagagi.

6           SM: Okay, yeah.

7           MW: You know, I stayed with Subagagi the whole time and learned a lot off of  
8 them.

9           SM: Okay. Let's see, you mentioned that you played football in high school.  
10 Did you continue that at Tech as well?

11          MW: No. I was a very average football player.

12          SM: What else did you do growing up in Poplar Bluff as far as you got older,  
13 entertainment types of things, whether it be movies or whatever? Hunting, I don't know  
14 what Poplar Bluff has to offer a young person growing up.

15          MW: Poplar Bluff has very little to offer a young person growing up, but just a  
16 very good friend network. To this day, some of my absolute best friends are my high  
17 school friends from Poplar Bluff that we still are very close to. My first girlfriend, before  
18 my first wife, is still a very good friend of mine and we talk at least monthly on the phone  
19 still.

20          SM: Wow.

21          MW: The man she married was still one of my best friends that I talk to a couple  
22 of times a year that we're still very close to. We didn't do a whole lot. Wasn't a lot to do  
23 in Poplar Bluff. Go to the show on the weekend, go to the A&W root beer stand which  
24 one of the teachers in the high school owned the root beer stand. It was open about six or  
25 eight months out of the year. Nickel root beers. There was two sides of town, cruise  
26 between the east and the west side of the town. There was a lake, Wappapello, north of  
27 Poplar Bluff. Lake Wappapello later became famous on one of the TV programs,  
28 *Designing Women*.

29          SM: Oh.

30          MW: The producer of *Designing Women* was a friend of ours, Linda Bloodworth  
31 that we grew up with in Poplar Bluff. In her show, she drew a lot of Poplar Bluff in

1 there, going to Lake Wappapello, a lot of the friends names, things that we grew up with,  
2 she used in that show. Just a typical Midwestern, easy-going, low pressure, that was the  
3 center of the world. It was a peach orchard.

4 SM: Well, when you were in school from '62 to '66 or '63 to '66, excuse me, of  
5 course, in the middle of that, well actually in the first year, Kennedy was assassinated.  
6 How did that affect you and the people that lived near you there at Georgia Tech?

7 MW: Well, you were asked a couple times about how horrible events affected  
8 you back then. It really didn't. I remember of course the footsteps were exactly where I  
9 was at at school, going up the administrative building and somebody saying that. Of  
10 course I remember the exact second that it happened. I was just getting started at school.  
11 It was a big transition for me. It was more difficult than I thought it was going to be. It  
12 was a tough school. I struggled that first year very hard, to do what I had to do to stay in.  
13 So I was very left with again just the mundane things. But I don't think it affected my  
14 thought process much. What I had to do each day to survive and get along.

15 SM: How about the Vietnam War as it was unfolding from '64, the Gulf of  
16 Tonkin incidence in August through the time you graduated? Did you pay very much  
17 attention to the news and stuff coming back from Vietnam?

18 MW: Well, because I was on a college campus, because I was going through  
19 deferments, I was well aware of what was going on. But especially towards the last, I  
20 was concerned timing wise about, was I going to be able to get through school. Because  
21 I was well aware out of the draft board we were out of that they were in big trouble.  
22 They were in serious trouble for a long, long time. I wasn't for sure whether I was going  
23 to get through school. Because of my little business I had going and everything else, I  
24 was a little bit distraught those last six months, the fall of that year, whether everything  
25 was going to get flipped upside down or not.

26 SM: Well, when you did graduate in '66, how concerned were you? I mean, you  
27 had already received a draft notice?

28 MW: Oh, yeah. I got an induction notice to report before I was out.

29 SM: They knew you were graduating and your number was up.

30 MW: Oh, yeah. Because I already had two deferments and got it changed. I  
31 went from whatever the school deferment was to school deferment-married. I got

1 married my last year there. So I had a school deferment and married. They knew  
2 exactly—they knew where I was at and when I was getting out. I was ground hamburger.  
3 That was it. I was gone. Kiss your ass goodbye.

4 SM: Did you give any thought to circumventing the draft system and enlisting or  
5 going into one of the services voluntarily, on your own terms?

6 MW: Absolutely not.

7 SM: No?

8 MW: No. My thought process at that time was just get it over with.

9 SM: Okay. Now, Georgia Tech was a land grant school?

10 MW: Absolutely. I was ROTC (Reserve Officer Training Corps).

11 SM: Yeah, so you went through ROTC.

12 MW: Absolutely. I went through the compulsory ROTC only.

13 SM: Okay, so only two years?

14 MW: Right. So I understood that well. Which obviously then helped me a  
15 tremendous amount slicking through the military. Obviously I was always a platoon  
16 sergeant through all the training and everything so I had it real easy. I knew everything  
17 that was going on and it was just a breeze for me.

18 SM: Okay, well we're at the end of our time for this meeting so let me go ahead  
19 and put an end on this real quick. Thank you very much, sir. This will end the first  
20 interview with Mr. Mike Ward.

**Interview with Mike Ward**

**Session [2] of [3]**

**Date: May 9, 2003**

1           Stephen Maxner: All right, this is Steve Maxner, continuing the interview with  
2 Mr. Mike Ward on the ninth of May 2003 at approximately 9:45. I'm in Lubbock, Texas,  
3 and Mr. Ward is in the Dallas area. But where exactly, sir?

4           Michael Ward: Dallas. I'm physically in Dallas.

5           SM: You are physically in Dallas today, all right, excellent. We are continuing  
6 the interview that we started at the 229 reunion in Charlottesville, Virginia. Today we  
7 are going to pick up with a discussion of your training. Sir, why don't we go ahead and  
8 start. If you would, just tell me, you went to Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri, for your basic  
9 training. Is that correct?

10          MW: That's correct.

11          SM: What were your first impressions?

12          MW: Confusion, obviously. Short hair. I think the normal things that anybody  
13 does when they first go into basic training. I went in to the entrance company, took the  
14 battery test, was a little bit bewildered. Remember that there were—in that introduction  
15 company I guess I'll call it for right now, there were two or three different times that  
16 different people were called out. One of them was that I was notified that I qualified to  
17 go to officer candidate school. I turned that down. Then I was told that I qualified to go  
18 to explosive ordnance disposal school. I listened to that and I actually thought about it  
19 because it wasn't an increase of my time. In other words, at that time when you were  
20 drafted, you were in for two years and out. In fact, it wouldn't have been an increase. It  
21 would have been a six-month training up east somewhere. I forget wherever the EOD  
22 School was at that time. But I was tempted because it sounded interesting, but I passed  
23 on going to EOD school and was then assigned. My basic training company was just  
24 there two or three days. They send everybody home for a Christmas leave. Because I  
25 went in the first part of December and I think about the tenth of December they sent  
26 everybody home and said, "Come back January 1," or whenever the date was. So I went  
27 home with a leave, only in the Army about two weeks. I came back in January and Ft.  
28 Leonard Wood, Missouri, is very cold in wintertime and went through basic training like

1 everybody else. Since I had had ROTC in college, obviously I was tagged for squad  
2 leader. I had the good and the bad that went with that. After basic training, I went to  
3 Fort Huachuca, Arizona, for field wireman school. I think it's 36K20 or 40 or something  
4 like that. That was, I think, a two-month school or something like that. Nothing  
5 significant happened out there, just the normal AIT (advanced infantry training). More of  
6 a schooling atmosphere than a military atmosphere. I was a squad leader out there also  
7 and I had a bunkroom at that time with—that guy's name was I think Gene Foster. His  
8 last name was Foster. He was a fullback with the San Diego Chargers. He was an  
9 interesting guy.

10 SM: Oh for crying out loud.

11 MW: I remember he was so strong he could do pushups with me sitting on his  
12 back. He was a big guy. I started learning a little bit more mechanically how the Army  
13 worked at that point in time.

14 SM: Well, real quick question. What did you find most challenging about basic  
15 training?

16 MW: Nothing.

17 SM: Okay. You felt you were physically fit, didn't have any purpose for—

18 MW: Well, I wasn't any more or less physically fit than anybody else. As they  
19 increased and turned up the heat on the physical fitness, I went along right with the rest of  
20 the group. Actually, the end of basic when you take your physical fitness test, about  
21 three days before that we went on that last overnight field march, I was very, very, very  
22 sick. I went into the hospital. I had a light case of pneumonia and was in the hospital  
23 three days and pleaded with the doctor to release me out of the hospital because I knew if  
24 I didn't take that PT (physical training) test that they would recycle me a couple weeks  
25 and I didn't want to do that.

26 SM: Yes, sir.

27 MW: He said, "Well, I'll rush you." He said, "Okay, go on and go." I remember  
28 after three days in the hospital, I was so rested that I probably ran the fastest mile and did  
29 the best of everything so it was really a little kind of a blessing.

30 SM: Wow.

1           MW: So I buzzed through that deal. There was nothing physically or mentally  
2 challenging, I didn't think, at basic training.

3           SM: What about at Fort Huachuca? Was there anything particularly challenging  
4 about your training there?

5           MW: No, no, pretty straightforward stuff. I got involved and as part of the deal  
6 went to the crypto school which was kind of fun. It was interesting, different. That was a  
7 little bit mentally challenging but not much. I got a crypto clearance and learned how to  
8 use cryptographic equipment. That was kind of fun. But other than that, just basic stuff.  
9 Then after that was over, through no surprise whatsoever, I got orders to go to Vietnam,  
10 obviously.

11          SM: Yes, sir. Now, let's see, when did you go to Fort Huachuca? What time  
12 frame?

13          MW: Time frame would have been probably April and May of '67.

14          SM: Okay. While you went through that training, and also when you were going  
15 through basic training, how much—well, first of all, how many of your instructors were  
16 Vietnam veterans that you knew of?

17          MW: At basic training, both drill sergeants and I think the majority of all the drill  
18 sergeants were Vietnam veterans. I don't remember what his name was—the senior  
19 drill—we had an E5 and E6 drill instructor. The E6 was a no-nonsense, just got back  
20 from Vietnam, no BS, just, "Let's get through this stuff, guys." The E5 was a little bit  
21 more gung ho and all that. But basically, got along fine with those guys. As in the  
22 military, how it works, when you're a squad leader you help them make their life easier  
23 so they made your life easier. So you started to learn that drill of how that worked inside  
24 the military. But no, I didn't see anything challenging. I think it probably had to do with  
25 at that point in time they were jamming so many people into the service and drafting so  
26 heavy and needed so many bodies that I'm sure all things were relaxed just to move more  
27 gross people through the whole system. That's my guess of what was going on. And  
28 probably the same thing at Fort Huachuca. I don't think our platoon sergeant or whatever  
29 he was called at that time was a—I don't know if he was a Vietnam vet or not. I can't  
30 hardly remember his face. He lived in the barracks with us. I remember that. We

1 seldom saw him. His job was just to get us back and forth to classes and that was about  
2 it. So that was kind of a non-memorable type thing as far as I can remember.

3 SM: Okay. Do you recall anything very specific in terms of lessons that they  
4 tried to pass on to you, knowledge that they tried to pass on to you concerning what it  
5 was going to be like for you in Vietnam? Because I would imagine they constantly  
6 reinforced, “Keep your head down, keep your butt down,” and, “These things will save  
7 you in combat.” Do you remember anything?

8 MW: Absolutely not. I don’t remember hardly anything specifically towards  
9 Vietnam in our training. It had to do much more with the specific skills. I do remember  
10 at advanced training one of the skills that I didn’t know was map reading that I became—  
11 matter of fact, I think they said that I was the only one that ever made a perfect score on  
12 the map reading contest going through that school. To this day, I’m still very good at  
13 maps and that did help me a tremendous amount over in Vietnam, understanding map  
14 reading and very quickly being able to look at a map and understand the contour and look  
15 out in front of me. But I think that has to do with my basic training as being an engineer  
16 and seeing in multi-dimensions—a flat topographic map and then looking at the terrain  
17 and seeing that. But boy, that said, mechanically that was a skill that has helped me in a  
18 lot of other things in life.

19 SM: Yes, sir. Okay.

20 MW: But no Vietnam training specifically.

21 SM: Okay. At Fort Huachuca, was any of your training, that you could tell, was  
22 any of it designed, tailored to specific environmental factors or combat factors that you’d  
23 encounter in Vietnam, whether it be jungle or whatever? Anything that you remember?

24 MW: Absolutely nothing. For sure nothing.

25 SM: Hmm, okay. Well, when you left—

26 MW: It was a technical training situation.

27 SM: It was purely technical?

28 MW: That’s all it was.

29 SM: Okay. But of course, with communications, the technical is sometimes  
30 affected very significantly by the geographic aspect, the weather, all kinds of things.

1           MW: In a sense they gave just as much technical training on how to handle the  
2 weather and sub-zero weather as they did a hundred-plus weather with high humidity.  
3           SM: Okay. So they were preparing you for all environments.  
4           MW: There was no focus at all about Vietnam.  
5           SM: Interesting.  
6           MW: There was probably more focus in basic training when they had a rifle and  
7 hand grenades and they said, “You better learn this, brother.” But Fort Huachuca was  
8 strictly a technical type training. I think it was obvious that the Vietnam War was  
9 ramping greatly and you heard numbers on graduating classes, that X percentage were  
10 going to Vietnam and here’s what percentage were going elsewhere.  
11          SM: Do you remember what those were, what the percentages were?  
12          MW: They were huge going to Vietnam.  
13          SM: I would imagine.  
14          MW: I don’t know exactly, but it was huge.  
15          SM: Now what was the composition of your classes in basic training first and  
16 then at Fort Huachuca? Especially, how do you think you represented a cross section of  
17 American society, whether it be culturally, ethnically, racially?  
18          MW: I was—there were few college graduates. Very small percentage, maybe, I  
19 would say less than ten, maybe less than five percent. So in that and I was also probably  
20 a year or maybe even two years older than most of them there. Most of them were much  
21 younger. Again, as I told you earlier, I went through I think three draft notices that I got  
22 deferments on so I was picked up a little bit later than most guys my age.  
23          SM: Yes, sir. Well, as you said, it was no surprise that you received orders to go  
24 to Vietnam. Did you know what unit you were going to be assigned to?  
25          MW: No I didn’t. I was—I didn’t know that until I got to Tan Son Nhut.  
26          SM: Okay. Well, did you get leave after your training at Fort Huachuca?  
27          MW: Sure did.  
28          SM: Yeah. So you were able to go home and spend a month I take it?  
29          MW: I think I got thirty days. My wife was big as a balloon at that point.  
30          SM: Was she really?



1           MW: She was like eight months pregnant I think, or seven months or in there.  
2   We had a nice—obviously she was pregnant when I went into the service and we had a  
3   nice thirty days together. She ended up flying—I went back to Kansas City, is where I  
4   was—I was actually inducted through St. Louis, but my family was in Kansas City. She  
5   flew out to California with me and spent the last week or ten days out in California with  
6   me. We went to Disneyland and all the normal stuff tourists do. I think my reporting  
7   leave point was up around Frisco somewhere and I left out of there.

8           SM: So what was the trip out and the flight, the actual flight out from San  
9   Francisco over to Vietnam?

10          MW: We went on a military airplane, did not go on a commercial airliner. Came  
11   back I think on commercial, but went over on one of the military planes that had the red  
12   nylon webbing in it. Very uncomfortable. I remember we landed I think on Wake Island  
13   for refueling at two or three or four o'clock in the morning. Everybody got to get off the  
14   plane and stretch their legs for an hour or whatever the number was. I remember  
15   standing on Wake Island and actually on one of the runway points and looking to each  
16   side and seeing the waves hitting. It started the thinking about the guys who were on  
17   Wake Island during World War II and what they went through out there. There were  
18   probably six or eight guys. We were walking around and we bumped into a memorial,  
19   one of those granite deals and a big piece of granite in the ground and a bronze plaque  
20   and read the story about the Japanese coming in and attacking Wake and what went  
21   through. Everybody was swallowing real deep, thinking, oh, shit, maybe we're going to  
22   start going through the same kind of stuff. So we did our refueling and got back on the  
23   plane and headed for Vietnam. I haven't thought about that story until we just talked  
24   about it, but I sure remember that evening. Beautiful on Wake Island and reading that  
25   bronze plaque about what those guys went through.

26          SM: What was the atmosphere like on the aircraft itself? Was it all enlisted men  
27   mixed with officers?

28          MW: It was a mixed group. It was a mixed group. I think it was. I'm not  
29   positive, but I think it was. I remember when we got to Tan Son Nhut and the door of the  
30   airplane opened up and I felt this incredible heat, this incredible humidity and the smell  
31   of Vietnam. I said, "What in the name of God is this?" Then when the doors got all the

1 way open they were hustling everybody off. I scanned the runway and looked around  
2 and saw all these planes coming and going and it was an absolute zoo. I went to some  
3 kind of a reception company area where they processed people in and was there a very  
4 short time, maybe hours. I would say within twelve hours—maybe it was in six hours, I  
5 had a set of orders in my hand that said the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry Division. There were a bunch  
6 of people that all got their orders at the same time and would look at them and, “Where  
7 are you?” and, “Where are you?” Somebody looked at me and said, “You’re going to the  
8 Cav?” and he just shook his head. I said, “Well, what’s that mean?” This was—I think  
9 he was a lifer. He knew what the Cav was and he said, “Do you know what the Air  
10 Cavalry is?” and I said, “No.” He said, “Good luck, brother.” I thought, well, that’s  
11 interesting. I wonder what this 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cavalry means.

12 SM: Right.

13 MW: I had no idea.

14 SM: Oh goodness.

15 MW: I had no idea. So within just a few more hours, we were on an airplane  
16 going to An Khe division base camp. So I would say within twenty-four hours, landed at  
17 Tan Son Nhut, got processed, got a set of orders cut and went to An Khe. I started the  
18 company processing in An Khe. It probably happened even quicker. I would say within  
19 a few hours knew I was going to B Company as a 229<sup>th</sup> Assault Helicopter Battalion.  
20 They had about a three-day, two or maybe three-day Vietnam orientation at the division  
21 base camp. That’s the first time I heard anything about any Vietnam combat, anything on  
22 what was going on. They had a three-day orientation. I think they had it broken down  
23 into two groups. They had grunts going to one orientation and they had everybody else  
24 going to the other orientation. I went to the other orientation. The first time I ever saw  
25 an M-16, the first time I ever saw an M-79 grenade launcher, the first time I ever saw a  
26 LAW (light antitank weapon). So they showed you all these different weapons, fired a  
27 lot of the weapons, looked at the jungle boots, why these boots are different, why you’ve  
28 got to wear this boot. If you’ve got other boots, throw them away. We’re confiscating  
29 them. You can’t wear any other boots but these over here. Issued you all your jungle  
30 fatigues and that kind of stuff and your Vietnam gear. I do remember where a lot of  
31 times you see in the movies when you’re in basic training that they give you any clothes

1 that will fit and just tell you to keep on going. Well, here they gave me some clothes that  
2 were too tight. I remember the guy looking at me and saying, “Don’t worry, you’ll fit  
3 into them real soon.” I said, “What? I can’t get into these things.” And I did. Because  
4 you—when I went to Vietnam, I weighed probably a hundred and eighty or eighty-five  
5 pounds and when I came back I weighed a hundred and thirty one.

6 SM: Oh my goodness.

7 MW: Yeah. As a matter of fact, that’s another story. They just about wouldn’t  
8 let me come back because at out-processing they picked up on that and said, “Jesus.” But  
9 anyway—

10 SM: What were they concerned about?

11 MW: You know, I’m six-one and that’s—

12 SM: That’s pretty skinny.

13 MW: They saw what my physical records were. You go through and they check  
14 you for VD (venereal disease) and everything else and your heart, you know, it’s a  
15 physical going back. They were very concerned. I was right on the edge.

16 SM: How did you feel when you left, physically, while we’re on that subject of  
17 your weight and your health? Did you feel like you were healthy or did you feel like you  
18 had to get a break?

19 MW: I was physically worn down pretty much, yeah.

20 SM: Were you? Okay. So back to the briefings that you received and—

21 MW: Oh, and I remember one of the first big briefings we sit down and there’s a  
22 stage, an outdoor stage. There’s five hundred guys there. Hundreds, anyway. Multiple  
23 hundreds are put through this thing. They said, “Do we have any E2s out in the crowd?”  
24 and a bunch of guys raised their hands. I raised my hand and said I was an E2. They  
25 said, “You have just been promoted to E3.” They all looked around and—and somebody  
26 came up and just said real loud, “Well, how’d that work? I’ve been sitting here.” “Well,  
27 you’ve got to understand. Over here, we want everybody up so we can bust you down to  
28 something if you do something wrong. We want to torture you and punish you if you’re  
29 not right.” So I thought, well, that’s a pretty good deal. Because back in that time I think  
30 you had to be in the service for a year before you could be an E3 pay-grade wise. Big  
31 issues like eighty bucks a month or something more. It was a lot of money back then.

1 But remember what I was making. I went from like 220 to 300. That was a huge change,  
2 huge change. So I was real happy about that, but I thought, well, what are they worried  
3 about doing something wrong? We're not gonna do nothing wrong. But anyways, I was  
4 tickled about that. So you got your uniforms and sewing patches on them and all that.  
5 That's the first time I saw OD (olive drab) green and black patches rather than colored  
6 patches. That's when they were changing in the military. They used to have—your  
7 nametag used to be white with black lettering and of course the colors of the vision  
8 patches and all that. Well, that was all gone. Now, all the patches were OD and black.  
9 So we got our things sewn up and got ready. Each night we would go back to our  
10 company area and report back the next morning for more stuff. I think the last—either  
11 the second or third day—the last day, they said, “Well, we're going to take you out on a  
12 patrol.” Well, what's this patrol stuff? They went out and there must have been a  
13 hundred people, all with M-16s. I remember going out there. They had web belts and  
14 they had a full pack of everything. Live grenades on you, which I was just really  
15 impressed with, that I had a couple of grenades strapped to me. I don't remember how  
16 many bandoliers of ammunition. As we're leaving this assembly area, somebody said,  
17 “All right, magazine up.” Everybody puts their magazine and this is really—because  
18 back in the States, obviously you didn't put a magazine in your weapon until you're  
19 ready to fire it. So we loaded on deuce and hassle and went out to the edge of the  
20 perimeter and went through the perimeter. As we're going through the perimeter, one of  
21 the guys says, “Lock and load,” and there's a hundred guys going (makes noise), all  
22 putting their ammunition in. Wait a minute now. We're going to walk down a trail with  
23 loaded guns? So we went out on a little walk in the woods, in the jungle for a few hours  
24 and fired our weapons. We fired a LAW and that kind of stuff. I guess that's when I was  
25 really thinking, “This is the real deal. This is the real deal.” The Army's got you  
26 walking around with a bunch of guys with loaded guns and grenades strapped on the side  
27 of you. You had to make sure your canteen was completely full. Again, this was with a  
28 group of non-grunts. These were all non-infantry people. So this is the first time myself  
29 and many of the others had ever seen any of this kind of stuff. So we were out most of  
30 that day and came back. Later I thought, “This is the perfect place for the VC to  
31 ambush—a bunch of green guys that don't know their ass in a hole in the ground. They

1 could take everybody out real quick.” So anyway, we come back. They said, “You’re  
2 released to your company now.” So I went back to my company area and there was  
3 maybe one other person that had processed in with me at B Company. Each company  
4 inside the division had their own company area at division base camp. Much like the  
5 States, it had concrete floors for the hooch, wooden sides, screens fold up, the typical  
6 jungle deal. But actually the barracks were in better shape than Fort Huachuca, Arizona,  
7 was. There was, I think, a supply sergeant and there was probably some kind of hard  
8 officer back there that took care of administrative matters. I just heard about him lately.  
9 He was one of those guys that you just kind of lose. We went—I think the next morning  
10 was on a helicopter going to Bong Song. I remember the first time I stepped on a  
11 helicopter, it was kind of the edge. When they pulled collective and it pulled away from  
12 the ground very fast, I grabbed a hold of the seat and it was a little bit unnerving. Then I  
13 realized, well, it’s a pretty stable platform. Went up to Bong Song and checked into the  
14 company area. At that time the company headquarters was right adjacent to the company  
15 operations bunker. So I went and checked in. Somebody was looking at my records and  
16 somebody said to me, “Can you type?” I said, “Well, sure.” Well, about four people in  
17 order popped their heads and said, “He can type. He can type. He can type.” I said, “So  
18 what? Can’t everybody type?” So the company clerk jumped up and went and got the  
19 first sergeant and told the first sergeant we’ve got somebody just in that could type. Then  
20 the first sergeant came and drilled me about, “Can you really type?” I said, “Yeah.” He  
21 said, “Sit down and type something out there for me, young man.” It was just ridiculous.  
22 So pretty soon a captain came up and his name was Daly. He said, “First sergeant tells  
23 me you can type.” I said, “Yeah.” “You can? Are you sure you can type?” I said,  
24 “Yeah.” He said, “Okay, that’s all I need to know.” He nodded at the first sergeant and  
25 the first sergeant said, “You’re going into operations.” I said, “What’s an operation? I  
26 mean is that a hospital?” “No, no, flight operations.” “Okay.” He said, “Here’s your tin,  
27 here’s where you’re going to be sleeping, yadda ya. You’re supposed to be back here and  
28 five or six o’clock tonight.” I said, “What do you mean, tonight?” He said, “Be back  
29 here at five or six o’clock tonight.” So I came back and there was Captain Daly there and  
30 he was a flight operations officer. He said, “We’re putting you in flight operations,” and  
31 then he started explaining to me what flight operations was. The first sergeant came and

1 Captain Daly, they said, “What we really want to you to do is do this, but we also want  
2 you to be CQ (charge of quarters) at night.” This might have been a day or two later, this  
3 was starting to evolve. So I, inside a few weeks, started working in operations late in the  
4 afternoon and then ended up—they changed the schedule and I ended up being the CQ  
5 also. So I ended up being in flight operations and charge of quarters at night. I  
6 remember for the first several days, Captain Daly would come down late and say, “Are  
7 you sure you can stay up all night?” I said, “What do you mean all night? This is  
8 daytime back in the States. I haven’t changed yet.” So that was my introduction into  
9 how I ended up in flight operations is because I could type and nobody else could, I  
10 guess. There is an absolute perfect accuracy on times and locations and grid  
11 coordinations and yadda yadda ya. If a digit’s off, it can be catastrophic. But anyway,  
12 with that said, I started the process of learning what was going on in a flight company,  
13 learned most of my skills from Captain Daly and other pilots. There were some  
14 operations, NCO type folks in the daytime and some of those worked at night with me to  
15 brief me on what was going on. I did some daytime stuff. I got to probably English by  
16 the fifteenth, tenth or fifteenth of July. Got to Vietnam by the fifth and probably the tenth  
17 or fifteenth, I was out in English Bong Song and was there maybe a week or ten days  
18 when I decided and got the courage that I wanted to go fly. Because in operations, I  
19 could see what was going on, pick me a little log flight to go on and spend a couple hours  
20 one morning flying log and understood a little bit what was going on. I had a good crew  
21 chief that kind of broke me and showed me what the works of a door gunner were. So  
22 from July until late October, early November, we were up in Bong Song learning my  
23 flight operations training and flying about every third day. Sometimes I’d fly two or  
24 three days in a row if the company was real busy and there were a lot of flights going on.  
25 I’d fly in the daytime and stay up all night. One time I did this for about three or four  
26 days in a row and I think maybe it was Captain Daly or the flight operations—probably  
27 towards the end it was actually probably in October, Walt Levering took over as  
28 operations officer, away from Captain Daly. They finally said—I was learning how to fly  
29 and sleep at the same time. After we’d take up off, my body would realize, “It’s getting  
30 cool, we must be up at altitude, I can sleep now.” As we’d start descending, going down  
31 into the LZ (landing zone), it’d get warmer and I’d wake up and, “Ah. Time to get

1 serious again.” So I learned how to sleep and fly in the daytime and work all night. But  
2 it was self-imposed poisoning. I didn’t have to do this. It got to the point though that  
3 everything in Vietnam was people-critical and there weren’t enough folks. They were  
4 just jamming people through there and we didn’t have enough of anybody. The reason I  
5 got into operations, there weren’t flight operations-trained people to do such things, let  
6 alone it was a new skill. There weren’t enough door gunners. There weren’t enough  
7 anything. So a lot of people did a lot of different things. English was a pretty—that was  
8 after the real bad things that happened up at English and it had quieted down. During that  
9 first three months, some of our ships took a few hits. We didn’t have any of the crew  
10 wounded. We didn’t have any of the crew killed obviously. We didn’t lose any ships—  
11 or no DX (direct exchange) ships. We had some that went down, but we were able to fix  
12 them all. So that initial point in time was a good time for me to get my feet on the  
13 ground, understand what flight operations was about, how the company worked. I do  
14 remember during that period of time that we were getting—we had a period where an  
15 awful lot of our folks were getting ill. I basically was—I think I went to the CO  
16 (commanding officer), which was Varner and said, “I think I know what the problem is  
17 and I think it’s our Lister bags.” He said, “What do you mean?” I said, “Everybody  
18 walks up to the Lister bag and puts their mouth down on the titty of it and takes a drink of  
19 water. I think we’re contaminating the bags.” He said, “Well, how would you know  
20 this?” I said, “Well, just my general training, I understand what’s going on.” He said,  
21 “Well, what was your training?” I told him and he said, “You’re a chemical engineer,  
22 you’re not a biologist or whatever.” But bottom line, somehow this went on for a day or  
23 two and I mean we had a lot people sick. Like maybe twenty-five or thirty percent of our  
24 company was coming down with something somehow. So through a long series of  
25 events, I found some basic water testing equipment over in Cam Ranh Bay. They let me  
26 off for a couple days. I climbed on a flight and went over to Cam Ranh Bay and got the  
27 basic equipment, came back, did some basic biological screening before and after and  
28 proved to everybody that it was the water bags and they got rid of the Lister bags in our  
29 company. Eventually, within a few weeks, got rid of them in all the air group as far as I  
30 know.

31 SM: Wow. What did they replace the Lister bags with?

1           MW: Don't even remember at this point in time. More jerry cans. The problem  
2 was the little tits on the end of the bag, the little plastic thing, you put two fingers behind  
3 it and your thumb and you'd get water. It was convenient just to bend over and get a  
4 drink of water out it. So I think we just used the jerry cans you had to pour out into  
5 something and that stopped the problem. So anyway.

6           SM: Then as a result, the number of illnesses went down?

7           MW: Just was over with. Stopped. So shortly after that, in early November, a  
8 strange situation happened when we heard that the company was going to be divided.  
9 We listened and talked to some other folks in that air group and in the battalion and  
10 nobody had heard of this before. But the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division—excuse me, the Big Red  
11 One, I think, and the 101<sup>st</sup> was having a lot of contact and a lot of problems up at Kontum  
12 and that they were short on aviation air lift and that the Cav was going to loan them ten  
13 helicopters and the crews to go along with it. B company got elected to provide the ten  
14 helicopters. So we were told half of the company was going to Kontum. We had twenty  
15 aircraft assigned to us and that means ten helicopters and ten crews. That basically meant  
16 twenty warrant officers, ten crew chiefs, ten gunners. Now what else were we going to  
17 send over to Kontum to support this, half the company? Well, we're not sure how long  
18 we're going to be there and actually the first day they sent six because we didn't have ten  
19 operational. Inside of a few days, the rest of them came operational and we ended up  
20 having ten over there. Well, they end up sending the company's maintenance officer,  
21 which was very good. We were always blessed with really strong flight maintenance  
22 people. One flight platoon sergeant in E6, I think his name was Smith, who was  
23 supposed to be in charge of the crew chiefs and gunners and one—I think it was the first  
24 platoon—was Ken Hamburger and that flight platoon which was about twenty warrants  
25 and then Major Varner was over there most of the time, and me. So we didn't have a  
26 mess hall. We didn't have a motor pool. We didn't have the orderly room and the  
27 administrative side. We didn't have the supply and we went to the Kontum airfield,  
28 which was about twenty clicks south of Dak To. Kontum airfield was also the Big Red  
29 One's northern-most major firebase from Pleiku. They had a three thousand foot runway  
30 there. When we went there the first day, I remember they said, "Where are we going to  
31 set up?" They said, "Right over there," which was the northwest corner of the runway



1 and it was outside the perimeter. I said, “What do you mean, outside the perimeter? We  
2 want to set up—” “No, there’s no room here.” So somehow we had six GP (general  
3 purpose) medium tents that came out of the sky from somewhere. We’re not sure where  
4 they even showed up. So somebody said, “Well, what do we do?” Literally, there’s a  
5 bunch of people standing around saying, “Well, what do we do now?” So I said, “Let’s  
6 start setting the tents up.” “What do you mean?” “Well, we’ve got to start setting it.”  
7 “Well, how do we do that?” So I started telling people what to do. I don’t think I really  
8 realized what was going on until Vel Varner, at the reunion, said, “Yeah, I remember  
9 when we went up to Kontum you yelling at me that my tent was out of line and I had to  
10 remove it over to another area.” So what was happening was, I had learned my skill, I  
11 knew everybody in the company and they knew who I was. There wasn’t anybody else  
12 taking charge so I was going to take charge of what was going on. So I organized how  
13 the company street was going to get laid out and where it was at. Then we took our  
14 personal gear that afternoon, went on the other side of the barbed wire and camped out  
15 for the night. One second.

16 SM: Sure.

17 MW: So the next morning, Major Varner said, “We need some things here. See  
18 what you can do about rounding up this and this and this and this and this.” I said,  
19 “Before we round that up, I think we need to get some barbed wire around this place and  
20 get another bunker built out here in the corner.” He said, “Yeah, you’re right.” I said,  
21 “How do we do that?” He said, “Well, I’m not sure, but see what you can get done.” So,  
22 bottom line is, I found a Seabee unit. I told them what we needed. I quickly, at that point  
23 in time—actually, the first thing that happened was there was some more basic supplies  
24 that we needed like food and water. I went down to the supply dump, which was on the  
25 south side of the runway, and heard the sergeant that was in charge of this. By the way, I  
26 had just gotten to E4. I had just been promoted to E4. I think I went up there. I was  
27 happy with that eighty or hundred dollar pay raise. There was an E6 or E7 sergeant there,  
28 running the supply dump and yelling at everybody and asking for requisitions. I’m  
29 thinking, I ain’t got no requisitions. I ain’t got nothing, but here’s a list of stuff I need.  
30 He was complaining to somebody about his CO that had to drive up to Pleiku the next  
31 morning and he wasn’t going to get here until eleven or twelve which means he couldn’t

1 get his work done and he had to put up with him all that next night because he couldn't  
2 get back to Pleiku in time. He couldn't get up because they had to clear the mines on the  
3 road every morning. So I'm thinking, hmm. So I walked up and I said, "Sarge, I can  
4 take care of your problem about your CO." He said, "What are you talking about?" I  
5 said, "I can have him flown up tomorrow morning and have him here early in the  
6 morning and then you can get rid of him." He said, "What do you mean?" He said,  
7 "Who are you with?" He looked down and he said, "You're some of the Cav guys." I  
8 said, "Yep," and I said, "We've got choppers." I said, "Have him at the VIP pad at  
9 Pleiku at seven o'clock in the morning and the Cav chopper will be there to pick him and  
10 he'll be here at 7:15. We'll take him back at noon. How do you like that, Sarge?" He  
11 said, "What can I do for you today?" I said, "Here's what we need." I told him that and  
12 he said, "What else do you need?" I said, "I need some constantino wire to put up." He  
13 said, "I can't do that, but I can tell you who to go see over here at the Seabees." So I  
14 went over to the Seabee station and put in my request for constantino wire and some  
15 other stuff and soon recognized that they needed certain air things done. Within a few  
16 days I had the barbed wire strung out and the new outpost built out there. Then I went to  
17 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry and got them to staff the guard post. I was doing all this by trading helicopter  
18 rides. Everybody needed something to be moved or somebody to be picked up and  
19 moved around. Since I was in flight operations, I was the guy that typed out the  
20 operations orders. Typically the orders would come down through division, through  
21 brigade, through battalion, down to company and disseminated. But nobody ever asked  
22 me the legitimacy of anything I put on a piece of paper. So early in the morning, before  
23 we would go out to Kontum to the ABC (advanced base camp) place to pick up their  
24 grunts to go on a combat assault, I'd send a ship down to Pleiku to pick up a guy that  
25 we'd move over here to get done the things we needed to get done. Nobody ever asked  
26 me, number one, "How did you get this barbed wire put up? Where did the food come  
27 from? How did we get the showers built by the Seabees? Where did we get this?"  
28 Nobody ever asked that and that was probably ahead of Bill Clinton, "Don't ask, don't  
29 tell." Although I realized that if anything ever happened to anybody when they were out  
30 on these missions, if a bird went down even, if they even had a mechanical failure and a  
31 report was made on it and, "What are they doing out there?" if it was ever traced back to

1 me, I was in major, major heat, regardless of why I did it. But, me thinking, “I’m an E4  
2 in Vietnam. What are they going to do, send me to prison in the States somewhere?” I’m  
3 joking obviously, but it was just getting done what I had to get done. At that point in  
4 time, there really wasn’t anybody else there. There was no support. Now, we basically  
5 ate C-rations the whole time we were up there because we didn’t have a kitchen or a mess  
6 hall or the normal stuff. We didn’t have any normal support. The first GP medium tent  
7 was—and I ended up putting some sandbags on the inside of it, about six foot square over  
8 in a corner and my cot on the other side, where I slept in. The field radios and some of  
9 the mechanical tools of the operation and that’s where we ran the operations out of.  
10 Typically my day was eighteen or twenty hours every day. I’d sleep a little bit in the  
11 afternoons, but I was up most of the night with operations and then getting everybody  
12 gone in the daytime and doing the other mechanical things to support the other stuff that  
13 had to get done. The food and the log and the ash and trash and getting water moved in  
14 and anything that had to be done. I only got to fly I think two or three times. I think just  
15 two. It was towards the end of it. It was probably the most horrifying flying I ever saw  
16 up there. Somebody in the 173<sup>rd</sup> at that particular time—101<sup>st</sup>, excuse me—made just  
17 some brain-dead decisions on where some pick-up zones going into some combat assaults  
18 and re-supplies were at and where the mortars were set up. They were within thirty yards  
19 of each other or a hundred yards. Very close. We were hauling dead bodies out of  
20 Kontum like cord wood and bringing them into a field morgue and stacking bodies up  
21 like cord wood. There was stacks of bodies there. Just a few feet away, you know, we’d  
22 take five-gallon buckets of water and swab the ship to blow the blood out of there. Over  
23 to hover to a pick-up zone, here’s guys going into the field. It was really a horrific thing  
24 that I saw and I’ll never forget it. Mostly, I’ll never forget those grunts getting on the  
25 ships and how big their eyes were, looking at the body bags. That’s one of my real  
26 focused, most vivid memories of Vietnam, about like when the plane door opened at Tan  
27 Son Nhut and I said, “Mm, this is what Vietnam smells like.” After that I probably didn’t  
28 want to fly very much anymore. That was a very horrifying experience to see that. So  
29 we just pressed on with it. I think we ended up staying up at Kontum/Dak To a lot longer  
30 than anybody thought we were going to. So probably we were there November and  
31 December at the Kontum airfield—or my portion of the company—when the rest of the

1 company was still up at Bong Song. Then in early January, we were notified that Bravo  
2 Company was getting to go back to An Khe to provide lift capability for the division  
3 Ready Reaction Force at An Khe. They always kept a company of helicopters, which is  
4 twenty, and a company of infantry at English—excuse me, at An Khe—for Ready  
5 Reaction Force, just to protect the division base camp above and beyond everybody else.  
6 They would basically rotate field units back in there for a week or ten days to get rest and  
7 recuperate and get their stuff back together. We needed that after Kontum just because  
8 there were so many flight hours going on and maintenance on ships. The same thing with  
9 grunt units. They'd got a lot of hours. They'd bring them back 'cause basically I don't  
10 think An Khe was ever hit with any major force. There was always a probe, but you  
11 couldn't get in that place with ten divisions. So we went back to An Khe to get rested up  
12 and that was a good thing. We were to go from there back up to English after our ten  
13 days. So they decided not to strike the tent, the camp at English and not to bring all of  
14 our jeeps and that kind of stuff down, and our trucks and yadda ya. So we were at An  
15 Khe for I don't know how many days. About two or three o'clock in the morning, the  
16 field phone rang and it was battalion flight ops. They said, "Go get your CO up. Get  
17 everybody up. We've got a big one coming." I said, "What's the big one coming?"  
18 "Get everybody up. We'll be back to you quickly, soon."

19 SM: What was the date of this approximately?

20 MW: This was approximately the fifteen or sixteen of January.

21 SM: '68.

22 MW: Understand Tet was the 31<sup>st</sup>.

23 SM: Right, right.

24 MW: So I went and got Major Varner up and I said, "I don't know what this is  
25 about, but you're supposed to put on your pants and come down to flight operations.  
26 Battalion has got some hot orders coming down for us. I think the whole company's  
27 moving." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I'm not sure, but I'm telling you,  
28 nothing like this has ever happened before." So we went and got several of the other  
29 senior flight op—I probably got Walt up and I probably got the other two platoon  
30 commanders up. We all rubbed our eyes together and were drinking some coffee in ops.  
31 The phone rings again and it's battalion. They said, "We've got a new missions for

1 tomorrow and the missions are to crank at 0500, head due north and by six o'clock, you'll  
2 receive orders on this frequency of where you're going." I said, "Wait a minute. Let's  
3 go through this drill again now." Because down there I was taking literally, missions  
4 over the phone on unsecured lines. I said—I don't remember what the drill was that I  
5 went through, but I knew this was not normal, uncalled for, and you can't just light up a  
6 ship, take off and head north and they'll say, "We'll call you." But basically, that's what  
7 the mission was that day and it was everybody—I forget the exact terminology, but the  
8 Air Mobile Operations portion of the company which meant the flight crews and  
9 operations and that's it. No cooks, no administrative, no anything. It was the flight  
10 crews and flight operations. Now we also still had a few ships up at Bong Song that were  
11 down for maintenance. So I started calling and talking to Bong Song, letting them know  
12 what was going on. In the meantime, more information was starting to come down. But  
13 basically we all fired up at 5:30 in the morning and started heading north. It became  
14 obvious, getting clearances out of An Khe, that everything in An Khe was going north.  
15 Everything. By the time we got to Bong Song the sky starts getting black—I mean,  
16 light—and I remember looking over and I think I'm sitting on my footlocker. I took two  
17 things, my footlocker and my chair, my aluminum chair with that nasty plastic webbing  
18 that went through it. Everybody had one. I look over and I saw a flying crane with this  
19 little box under it. I asked the aircraft commander, the peter pilot and said, "Do you guys  
20 know what's under there?" Somebody said, "That's the division TOC." I said, "What's  
21 a TOC?" That's the Tactical Operations Center for the division. We saw another one  
22 and another one had a box underneath of it. So the division commander was under a  
23 flying crane in his mobile operations center, heading north. The sky starts to become  
24 black with helicopters. We had something in the neighborhood of 450 or 500 helicopters  
25 within inside probably a several click area, all heading north. We knew we were going  
26 off the map because earlier, maybe at five in the morning and we're scurrying around to  
27 get maps north of Hue because our maps all stopped at Hue. We knew on coordinates it  
28 was north of Hue by that time. Somehow we did find two or three maps. I remember  
29 Walt was an aircraft commander and operations officer at that point. I basically always  
30 flew with an operations officer. Whenever he flew, I'd fly with him. So we're chatting  
31 back and forth on the radio and it's obvious that this is really something big. I mean,

1 they're moving every helicopter in the division. Oh, wait a minute. They took all the  
2 105s with them too, all the Chinooks and all of the grunts. We hauled the grunts, the  
3 105s and all the air assets and went north. All the grunts didn't go the first day. All the  
4 artillery didn't go the first day, but by the second day, some of them made round trips and  
5 went back and picked them all up. So by the second day, which would have been the  
6 sixteenth or seventeenth, we were all north, the whole division, 250 miles, all the combat  
7 arms of the division. We went into a place called Tombstone, which was LZ Tombstone,  
8 which was about fifteen clicks northwest of Hue. It was called Tombstone because it was  
9 an old imperial graveyard of Vietnam, one of the old dynasties and it was quite  
10 recognizable. That was either on the sixteenth or seventeenth. I remember that night  
11 when we started setting up. There wasn't any constantino wire out there and somebody  
12 made the bright decision, "You know, we've got all these helicopters under the seal.  
13 There ain't constantino wire around it. So we're going to take all the helicopters into  
14 Hue Phu Bai and laager all night and we'll come back the next morning." I'm thinking,  
15 "Wait a minute. There ain't nobody left but me and few other guys." With a division,  
16 there maybe was two hundred people that didn't go into Hue Phu Bai that first three  
17 nights. It took a little while to get some kind of perimeter set up, not long, maybe three  
18 days at the most. They had barbed wire and primitive outpost and bunkers. They had a  
19 perimeter set up. But for two or three nights—the first night there was nothing. We were  
20 just out in the middle of the graveyard. The second night wasn't much better. The third  
21 night there was a perimeter established all the way around. We realized that we weren't  
22 playing grunts and by the way—so by the twenty-first or twenty-second, we had a  
23 division base camp up there. By that time, all of the grunts were there. Three brigades of  
24 grunts, all the artillery was there. By the twenty-second, twenty-third, twenty-fourth, we  
25 had a couple outlined firebases lined up with 105s and some company battalion sized  
26 grunts around them, trying to put up some base security around that, some interlocking  
27 fire. Just a few days later, we're sitting up on the tombstones, looking down, literally, it  
28 was fifteen, eighteen hundred feet above Hue and you could easily see into Hue at night.  
29 We're saying, "You know what? The Vietnamese really know how to celebrate their  
30 New Years. Would you look at all the fireworks going off down there? Man, that's  
31 pretty cool." Boy, the radios started humming and that was the start of Tet. It was

1 abundantly clear to all of us up there at that point in time why the Cav was put in between  
2 Hue and the DMZ (demilitarized zone). They had no idea we were there. They had  
3 some. But in the big picture, they did not have real good communications. So that night  
4 as the orders started coming down through division, through 11<sup>th</sup> Air Group to the 229<sup>th</sup>,  
5 the Cav's main mission was to retake all of the bridges from Highway One from the  
6 DMZ down to Hue. It was the first night. They had Highway One. It was theirs. That  
7 next day was the first day we ever saw large amounts of bodies out in the open. They  
8 were literally marching down Highway One in what we would call a parade fashion and  
9 in company-sized units, dress right dress and AKs on their shoulders and fresh uniforms.  
10 I remember, we're going on a combat assault and I popped over the radio, "Did you just  
11 see what I saw?" "Yeah, we saw." Well, that morning we were on a six plus two combat  
12 assault into a bridge. Here is at least a company-sized, 120 to 150 NVA, brand new  
13 uniforms, brand new AK-47s marching down the highway four abreast. They saw the  
14 flight of six plus two go over them and they all—most of them raised their heads up and  
15 looked at the helicopters. The guns said, "I don't believe this." They peeled off and  
16 came down and after the first pass of the two gun ships there were maybe eight or ten  
17 guys still standing up. As I looked down, I said, "Those guys are in awe." About that  
18 time, on the other side from the crew chief, they were all firing their weapons and those  
19 eight or ten guys were gone. That day we saw more of them marching up and down the  
20 highway. The next morning we saw a few of them, but never again. It took them about a  
21 day to realize that you don't just stay out in the open with helicopters running over your  
22 head. They were that green coming across the DMZ. They had not had very good  
23 training about what do you do when you see a helicopter come. We got a lot of them  
24 those first few days. I think it took us about three or five days to completely re-secure  
25 Highway One. Now we re-secured Highway One and cut off their main supplies going  
26 into Hue which they thought they were going to be running trucks down into Hue for re-  
27 supply and we stopped that. Because there was a lot of Air Force stuff up on the DMZ  
28 and north, working out on physical truck convoys that were supposed to re-supply the  
29 groups that were in Hue and all over the rest of the country. So we spent most of the rest  
30 of January at Kontum—excuse me, at Tombstone. Then in February we moved to a new  
31 Camp Evans, which was north of Tombstone. We were still well within sight of the Tet

1 Offensive that time. We were also involved—the Marines and I think it was the 101<sup>st</sup>  
2 really took a lot of heat in Hue. I remember when we'd fly in there we'd see a lot of the  
3 old M—I think it's the M-48 tanks, the American old-style tanks—right up next to the  
4 wall of the imperial city or the citadel. They would run those tanks up the wall and  
5 Charlie would throw Molotov cocktails off and torch them. It was an ugly scene. The  
6 Cav was involved on the very last days as the Tet was falling apart, we inserted a  
7 company right in the center of the citadel and worked our way out instead of—the  
8 Marines were on the outside trying to work their way in. I think in twenty-four hours we  
9 retook the citadel and it was over. That was another thing where the Marines really felt  
10 like the Cav was rubbing the stuff in their face. It was a tactics issue. Where they would  
11 fix bayonets and charge up the hill, we would call artillery into the top of the hill, air  
12 assault the top of the hill and walk down the hill. So it was a tactics issue. Anyway, by  
13 this time we're at Evans, forward base camp. This is when the Cobras first started  
14 coming in in big numbers into the Cav. We were getting re-supplied with Cobras which  
15 was a big advantage for us. It helped us out a lot. We were at Evans in February. That's  
16 where—remember I told the story about Rocky and the ammo dump going off? That's  
17 where that happened, at Evans.

18 SM: Oh, okay.

19 MW: That's the ammunition cooking off and was only there about a month. One  
20 of the things, being an operations person, I was basically excluded from all other duties.  
21 I didn't pull guard duty. I didn't pull any, any duties because operations was basically a  
22 full-time, always going, every hour of the day you're up. Because that was the nerve  
23 center and control of the whole company, what was going on, on a tactical basis. I was in  
24 operations and one of the other ops guys came in and said, "First Sergeant says you've  
25 got to come outside. There's a problem." I said, "Oh, fuck, what's this?" So I come  
26 outside and there's a big formation. The first sergeant said, "Come here, Ward." He got  
27 out there and he starts eating my ass out about something. He said, "Well, if we can't get  
28 your straightened out, I guess we've got to promote you. You're now an NCO  
29 (noncommissioned officer) and gave me my sergeant stripes." Everybody else guffawed  
30 and all that kind of crap. So I went back to the operations tent and he said, "You make  
31 sure those are on your sleeve by tomorrow morning." I said, "Yeah, top." So I got my



1 stripes at Evans and that was like six months. I go over to Vietnam as an E2,  
2 automatically promoted to E3 when I get into the division. I was E4 in like four months.  
3 I was a buck sergeant in six months or seven. Any time after Kontum, pretty much the  
4 officer group stayed out of the decision making process in operations. Typically what  
5 was supposed to happen was as the missions came down, operations would sift through  
6 what helicopters were available as far as how much maintenance, how many hours it can  
7 still fly, what the missions were probably going to require that day, what crews were  
8 available. Then basically the platoon leader from the officer group would post crews to  
9 the ships after operations did that and then the platoon sergeants would post the gunners  
10 because of course the crew chiefs stayed with the ship all the time. But really what  
11 would happen was they would do that. Then operations would change things to make  
12 things fit a little bit better. Typically there were also a lot of missions that came down  
13 late at night, changes made, and I would just change them. Captain Hamburger didn't  
14 like me at all.

15 SM: Really?

16 MW: No. He didn't like me.

17 SM: What gave you that impression?

18 MW: Well, it wasn't an impression. There were a lot of arguments about me  
19 doing things that was unauthorized. I mean, I would just change things at night. He  
20 would post what crews he wanted on a ship for a certain mission and I'd get everybody  
21 up the next morning and there was everything changed. By this time we had a new flight  
22 operations officer named Dave Nessitt. He was a first lieutenant. Walt was operations  
23 officer for about three months. Dave Nessitt probably became operations officer about  
24 when I became a buck sergeant. So I was doing my normal thing, I'd change around  
25 things in the middle of the night and crew's helicopter missions, whatever it was. My  
26 typical hours were I would come in about 4:30 or 5:00 in the afternoon and stay until  
27 seven o'clock the next morning or eight o'clock the next morning. So this particular  
28 evening, Hamburger comes down to the operations bunker and starts drilling me about  
29 why I did this or I did that. Dave Nessitt stood up and said basically, you know, tried to  
30 protect me in some ways. About that time, Rocky Lane was now our company  
31 commander and Colonel Brown lieutenant was a battalion commander who had walked

1 into the operations—came in with the operations order. Captain Hamburger is just eating  
2 my and First Lt. Dave Nessitt's ass out about that and Lieutenant Nessitt says, "Well,  
3 that's his presumptive authority to do those kind of things." Major Lane and Colonel  
4 Brown heard this for about ten seconds. The battalion commander says, "Presumptive  
5 authority, huh?" That stopped Hamburger cold in his tracks. They said something about  
6 the missions the next day and what was going on in operational readiness and that kind of  
7 stuff. But there was always an issue with doing things outside of the stateside way of  
8 doing things. So yeah, when you ask what made me think that—not think. It's obvious.

9 SM: You were usurping his authority.

10 MW: Oh shit, everybody's. It was done my way. I was the first my way or the  
11 highway. But really, nobody understood—nobody had the slightest comprehension about  
12 really what was going on. There was just too many things for—everything was cause and  
13 effect. So with all that said—and there was a lot of politics between what pilots—there  
14 was a big political issue about good and bad pilots. A lot of pilots wouldn't fly with  
15 other pilots. There were certain pilots you could put on certain missions because of their  
16 skill levels. That caused a lot of friction between some of the officers. Well, I took the  
17 friction. I changed them. So there was a lot of dynamics going on in those kind of  
18 things. Who I told you earlier about the guy that trained me in operations, Captain Daly?  
19 He was a walking disaster. He shouldn't have ever got wings. He was scary. There  
20 were other pilots who were like that. You had to be very careful on who they flew with.  
21 Then there were some good pilots that just wouldn't fly with those guys or they would—  
22 and crews. I understood the dynamics better than anybody. Most people then understood  
23 that I knew the dynamics and, "It'll all work out. Just shut up and stay out of his way."

24 SM: Interesting.

25 MW: I was a buffer sometimes between those things. So anyway, that's why I  
26 said Captain Hamburger didn't really like me very much. In early March, the next  
27 probably big, significant thing happened was Khe Sanh and the relief of the Marines up  
28 there on the first of April. That was a very significant time. Tet was over in February  
29 and we jumped right into Khe Sanh. That was tail end of Tet, obviously or the start,  
30 actually, of a new thing, I think.

1 SM: Well, before we talk about Khe Sanh, first of all, let me pause the recording  
2 equipment for just a minute.

3 MW: Okay.

4 SM: First of all, what was your unit strength before Tet actually started, in early  
5 January of '68? Do you recall?

6 MW: We were being considered—typically we were about seventy-five percent  
7 mission-ready aircraft.

8 SM: Okay. Which include how many aircraft and personnel?

9 MW: We were assigned twenty aircraft. We had about forty warrant officers,  
10 about six or eight hard officers. Excuse me, forty-five warrant officers, about six hard  
11 officers, a platoon leader for each of the two flight platoons, XO (executive officer), CO,  
12 maybe somebody else in there for something, maintenance officer. The maintenance  
13 officer was always like a W3 or W4. Then most of the warrants also had extra duties.  
14 One of them might be the motor platoon officer or the communications officer. They had  
15 extra duties that they traded around. Then we had obviously twenty crew chiefs and then  
16 anywhere from maybe just ten or fifteen gunners. We were always short on gunners. But  
17 we had typically a full compliment.

18 SM: So the total number of people—I'm sorry, go ahead.

19 MW: Maybe 120, 130 people. Twenty helicopters

20 SM: So almost the same size as an infantry company.

21 MW: Right.

22 SM: About 125, 130 people.

23 MW: Right.

24 SM: What was the supply system, logistic system like and maintenance?

25 MW: Two maintenance. You had helicopter maintenance and motor  
26 maintenance.

27 SM: Motor pool.

28 MW: Right. Motor poolers were a warrant officer in charge of the motor pool.  
29 There was a motor sergeant, two or three motor guys. We had one five-ton, two deuce  
30 and a halves, about four ton and a halves, half dozen jeeps, four mules. I might be off  
31 one or two vehicles on one of the quarters, but that was about our motor pool. Maybe

1 two mechanics, motor mechanics. Maybe two. Maybe only one, I'm not sure. Then the  
2 flights had either a W3 or W4 in charge of aircraft maintenance. You had two or three  
3 specialists. You had a transmission specialist, an engine specialist, and an avionic  
4 specialist. That was about it, and then the crew chiefs, obviously. So that was the main  
5 size. Then there was—the first sergeant obviously ran the administrative side of the  
6 company and he had a couple of company clerks. There was a supply—I think the  
7 supply sergeant pretty much stayed back at the division base camp. He would get stuff  
8 moved forward as we needed it. There was maybe one or two supply clerks that got stuff  
9 moved around. There was a mess sergeant, four or six cooks. There was a  
10 communications unit that I should have been in, that handled the radios and telephones  
11 and communication stuff for the company, the antennas and all that kind of  
12 communications stuff. That was the company.

13 SM: Okay. Were there any supply problems or shortages of equipment or  
14 materials at all?

15 MW: There's always—you know, nothing horrendous.

16 SM: Nothing that prevented aircraft or vehicles from being kept—

17 MW: Yeah. Oh, sure there were. We always had stuff we were short on. We  
18 never had everything all the time. Other than not running out of C-rations or water, we  
19 ran out of all kinds of things. We always had that, water, C-rations and ammo we were  
20 okay on all the time. Other than that, we were always short of this or heavy on that. I  
21 don't think we ever ran out of beer either, but that was a personal supply issue that we  
22 kept in order.

23 SM: Prior to Tet, what was the initial enemy that the unit would encounter out in  
24 the field? Was it NVA (North Vietnamese Army), VC (Viet Cong), combination?

25 MW: Bong Song was definitely VC, definitely VC. A little bit of NVA. The  
26 group just before us really decimated the NVA pretty bad down in the Central Highlands.  
27 Most of the NVA had retreated back west into Laos and Cambodia. As we went up  
28 north, obviously the complexity just changed instantly and much more aggressive NVA  
29 at that point up north. Much less VC.

30 SM: The tempo of operations prior to Tet—over the course from the time you got  
31 there in-country to the time, say around mid-January of 1968, would you describe the

1 tempo of operations between you and the enemy units that you were encountering and  
2 engaged? Did it increase, decrease, or stay the same?

3 MW: I would say English, from July until October was rather steady. Mostly  
4 VC, no major engagements. Kontum/Dak To—we were at Kontum but the fight was at  
5 Dak To was absolute probably the worst—it was really bad ground-wise. Not aviation-  
6 wise but ground-wise was really bleak. That's where we were stacking up bodies like  
7 cordwood. So that November-December was very, very intense. That was all NVA or  
8 ninety percent I think, NVA. Then obviously there was a stand down for our company at  
9 An Khe for those ten days. Then as soon as we flew north to Tombstone, it rolled back  
10 into NVA again.

11 SM: What were your aircraft losses before Tet?

12 MW: We didn't have one.

13 SM: You didn't have any aircraft lost?

14 MW: You mean, lost, lost, lost?

15 SM: Shot down.

16 MW: Oh, that's a different story.

17 SM: Okay. Yeah, not necessarily completely destroyed but yeah, let's clarify.

18 MW: Couldn't count. Lots.

19 SM: Lots shot down?

20 MW: Yeah.

21 SM: Wow. Typically small arms fire or were there—?

22 MW: Yeah.

23 SM: Were there any 12.5 or 12.7, excuse me?

24 MW: No, that didn't come until much later.

25 SM: Okay. How about the size of the typical enemy that your unit would engage  
26 prior to Tet? What was the average unit size?

27 MW: Well, we were always—a typical combat assault was six plus two. We had  
28 a big one with six plus two plus two which would have been six lifts, two guns and two  
29 ARAs (aerial rocket artillery). Then a real big combat assault would be—a typical  
30 combat assault would be a six plus two with a tube prep. In other words, it would be  
31 prepped by artillery then the gun ships would take over and then the lift ships went going

1 down and the door gunners would take over. On a little bit hotter area, they would do  
2 tube and ARA prep, where they'd tube prep it at four minutes out. ARA would work out  
3 for two minutes. They would extend. The gun ships would take over for the next ninety  
4 seconds and the last thirty seconds the lift ships would set down with their door gunners'  
5 work. So it depended on the day what the size of the lift and operations were on how big  
6 the combat assaults were. But typically, most of the combat assaults were six plus two  
7 and there were some twelve plus twos. The big ones happened up north, not down south.  
8 They got really big up north. So I would say the area of operations changed because of  
9 the physicality of the supplies from the DMZ and the Ho Chi Minh trail up north. They  
10 had more to fight with. Tanks, you name it.

11 SM: Yeah. Let's see. Well, during the Tet Offensive, I would assume that, given  
12 the heightened activity, that you guys probably lost—the definition of lost now meant  
13 completely destroyed as opposed to the previous meaning of just shot down. Did you  
14 completely lose any aircraft during Tet that was utterly destroyed by enemy fire?

15 MW: We had some that were later red-Xed after we got them back. I mean, we  
16 got them back, but then they decided they were in such bad shape we'd just scrap them.  
17 A few.

18 SM: During the course of this period, did any pilots get captured or  
19 crewmembers get captured after their aircraft were shot down?

20 MW: No.

21 SM: How about prior to Tet? No one was captured?

22 MW: Nope.

23 SM: Excellent. Okay.

24 MW: Ships seldom ever went out by themselves—always in groups. When a  
25 ship went down, it was like a magnet. Everybody was instantly there. I was just  
26 thunderstruck during the Iraqi War when the gun went down and nobody went in after  
27 him. That never—it didn't matter how heavy the fire was. We just kept stacking them  
28 up. In other words, we get one shot down, we come in and get another one shot down  
29 and another one until we got them out of there. It didn't stop, to my recollection. I don't  
30 ever remember a ship going down and we knew it was down and wouldn't go in there.  
31 We just kept coming.

1 SM: Well, what were your personnel losses like before Tet?

2 MW: We had several minor wounds. We lost a few people to wounds. Nothing  
3 great—small numbers.

4 SM: How about during Tet?

5 MW: Same. We lost a few people on minor wounds. Some of them left the  
6 company and went to hospitals. Some came back, some didn't. Not big numbers,  
7 though.

8 SM: When you say not big numbers, could—

9 MW: Less than a handful.

10 SM: Okay.

11 MW: But we had lots of holes in ships. Our mission-ready numbers went way  
12 down. Probably from seventy percent down to forty percent because they were just torn  
13 up all the time.

14 SM: Wow.

15 MW: We were at over seventy-five most of the time, but we were probably less  
16 than fifty there towards the end because we just got lots of holes.

17 SM: Now during your first six months in-country, the last half of '67, was there  
18 very much emphasis on getting body count in your unit? You know, making sure that  
19 reports were going up the chain of command with good numbers indicating success in the  
20 battlefield.

21 MW: I think that happened more on the grunt level than on the aviation level  
22 although the gun companies did take that into account. They like to count.

23 SM: What about during and after Tet? Did that change at all?

24 MW: That isn't my knowledge. I don't know how that worked.

25 SM: Okay. Just curious. Since you worked in operations and of course a lot of  
26 operational reports—

27 MW: I saw them and I remember them going through. It really wasn't an issue to  
28 me. I was mostly interested in the very last pages of the sit-reps on prisoner  
29 interrogations. Those were always fascinating to me, to read those.

30 SM: Well, prior to Tet, did your unit capture very many prisoners?

31 MW: Well, helicopter units aren't in the business of capturing.

1 SM: No.

2 MW: We haul them after the grunts capture them. But yeah, that was a constant  
3 deal. I was in a ship one time when one just jumped out on his own.

4 SM: Oh for crying out loud.

5 MW: I know. We didn't push him. He jumped out. There was an ARVN (Army  
6 of the Republic of Vietnam) interpreter and he was putting the hard scrutiny—we had  
7 two of them in the ship. I think the ARVN interpreter had a rag around the guy's neck  
8 and he was choking him—one of the prisoners. The other one said, "I think he decided  
9 he was jumping." I don't think he knew what he was doing and he just jumped out.

10 SM: Oh for crying out loud. Did you guys go back for him?

11 MW: No. I mean, we were probably at fifteen or eighteen hundred feet when he  
12 jumped out. He hadn't been on a helicopter before.

13 SM: Oh goodness. Well, you had mentioned—you qualified that very  
14 specifically with, "he jumped out on his own," the implication being that there may have  
15 been instances where they might have been assisted. Were you aware of any—?

16 MW: I never saw that.

17 SM: Okay.

18 MW: You hear stories, but I never saw that.

19 SM: Okay. Did your unit work closely with ARVN before Tet?

20 MW: Oh yeah, especially in Bong Song.

21 SM: Okay. What was your impression on them, of the ARVN?

22 MW: I remember the first, Jesus—this is another one of my snapshot memories  
23 that's really the strongest. The first group, the time we ever took ARVNs on a combat  
24 assault, we would always haul six troops, six grunts. Well, with ARVNs we would haul  
25 eight. I always thought that was interesting. But it was eight plus—plus chickens and  
26 pigs and—no, I swear to God.

27 SM: No, I know.

28 MW: They would take pigs, little piglets, they would take chickens, goats. I  
29 always remember their combat assaults were never into the tight combat assaults we had.  
30 It was more like log missions than combat assaults. I don't ever remember taking an  
31 ARVN unit into a hot LZ.



1 SM: Wow.

2 MW: I'm sure it happened, but never when I was—again, I flew every third or  
3 fourth day so on the average. Maybe they did go into hot LZs, but I was never on one  
4 where they ever did that. Now, all the ARVNs were up north and were heavily involved  
5 in Hue especially. I don't have a lot of recollection of them. I just remember all the crap  
6 they used to take in with them and it didn't seem like the missions they got were very  
7 intense missions. That's my recollection of the ARVNs.

8 SM: Prior to going to Vietnam, what was your opinion of what the United States  
9 was trying to accomplish there?

10 MW: I probably didn't have an opinion.

11 SM: How about after you got there? What was your opinion of what the United  
12 States was trying to do there?

13 MW: I would say I probably didn't have an opinion until a little bit into—I guess  
14 the only thing that really galvanized my opinion on Vietnam, good, bad, or indifferent,  
15 was—and I think it was later, after actually January, where they had their first elections.  
16 That particular—I think we were either at Evans or Sharon, which would have been  
17 February, March, April, somewhere like that. One afternoon I took a jeep and went in.  
18 Or wait a minute, this could've been in Bong Song. Let's forget the date. But anyway, I  
19 decided to go into town to do something. I remember driving down the dirt road and  
20 there was a bunch of people lined up in front of one of the huts and they were lined up to  
21 vote. I went by maybe fifty or seventy-five yards and a grenade went off in that line of  
22 people. I stopped and turned around. Well, there was an MP (Military Police) jeep  
23 coming the other way. Well, the MP jeep got there right of way. So I just pulled over  
24 and watched what was going on and I turned around and came back and kind of was just  
25 snooping to see what was happening. Somebody just laid a grenade in the voting line.  
26 About fifteen minutes later they hauled off two or three bodies. By that time, ARVN  
27 MPs got there and everybody just got back in line to vote. I thought, I don't believe in  
28 the States, if that happened, everybody would get back in line again. Probably after that  
29 point in time, I saw a little bit different about were we over there for a just reason.  
30 Because I think most of the people down deep inside did want to vote. Now, maybe they  
31 wanted to vote us out—did or did not—but they wanted to vote. So I could appreciate

1 that. To this day, that's another vivid recollection of that going on, those folks getting  
2 back in line after that grenade went off with no prompting. They just did it.

3 SM: Interesting. Do you think you understood what the United States was trying  
4 to do there?

5 MW: I'm not sure whether I did or not at that point in time. I mean, I heard the  
6 reasons and the rhetoric at that point in time, but my analyzation was only what I could  
7 see. I saw an obviously inept ARVN military. I didn't understand what was going on  
8 with the government. I saw what we were doing and I thought that was a reasonably  
9 good thing to do and understood the domino theory and believed that to be reasonably  
10 correct, which is a whole other story. So I didn't have any principle issues with Vietnam  
11 at all. After that whole grenade incident in that voting, I was very comfortable from that  
12 point on about why we were there, much like Iraqis now. They might want to vote us  
13 out, but that's okay as long as they're in control of their future.

14 SM: Yes. So when Tet hit—let me get back to some of the specifics of what you  
15 were saying earlier—this didn't come as a surprise at all, really, to your unit. You  
16 guys—

17 MW: Well, no, wait a minute. It came to a surprise to my unit. In retrospect, it  
18 was obvious why they had moved us up there. We didn't know why we moved, why we  
19 jumped through our ass, but boy, it was real clear a few days later that they knew  
20 something was up. Now, could it have been as part and parcel of the An Khe defense,  
21 too? Yes. As you well know, part of Westmoreland wanted a mass assault on An Khe.  
22 They were praying for it. With a Cav about less than thirty flight minutes away to  
23 support them, which is what happened later on, the Cav was in a good blocking position  
24 to control anything going on up there at that point in time. But without us being up there,  
25 it could have had a different outcome very possibly.

26 SM: Now, when you—let's see. Is there anything else prior to helping to provide  
27 relief at Khe Sanh, is there anything else that you want to discuss?

28 MW: No, except it took about ten days or two weeks to get all of our stuff up  
29 north that came up in a convoy—a ground convoy.

30 SM: Okay. Well, why don't you go ahead and discuss the next phase of Tet, your  
31 participation of Tet and seize of Khe Sanh for your unit.

1           MW: Yeah. Khe Sanh was—Tet had basically wound down. It was clear at that  
2 point in time they weren't going to do what they wanted to do, that we were in control of  
3 the country again in general. We were moving back into more of a normal type of  
4 combat operations. Obviously Khe Sanh was the news leader for a huge period of time.  
5 We didn't quite—we, being Army—didn't quite understand the Marine tactics. This was  
6 an ongoing thing always—why the Marines didn't do things and we did one thing. I  
7 mean, our company—and I'm sure you've heard this story many times—we supplied  
8 Marines on an unscheduled basis constantly because they couldn't get re-supplied. It had  
9 more to do with their tactics and their equipment than anything else. We realized, we  
10 knew what was going on at Khe Sanh. We knew how bad it was. We probably knew for  
11 two days, operationally wise, we were going into Khe Sanh so there was a lot of  
12 planning. Usually I don't think we had that much notice, but we knew we were going  
13 into Khe Sanh. I know I mentioned to you the story about the night before you saw the  
14 picture of Rocky with the case of beer. We took our onionskin papers and made lots of  
15 little typewritten things, "Have no fear, the Cav is here." "Come out of your hole, the  
16 Cav is on patrol." We made many, many thousands of those. The first ship over Khe  
17 Sanh that morning, we dumped them out and it was interesting to see the Marines crawl  
18 out of there bunkers as they were being mortared and rockets coming in. They were kind  
19 of numb to it by that time and would pick up these little pieces of onionskin paper and  
20 scratch their heads and look up the air. The first day, the first two or three days of the  
21 operation, was not to secure Khe Sanh, but again, by Cav tactics, securing all the high  
22 ground around Khe Sanh. We assaulted all of the hilltops. We took over two or three of  
23 their—they did have some outposts, but we quickly took those over. We actually took  
24 the Marines back to Sharon. Oh, and by the way, in March is when we moved into  
25 Sharon. We moved into Sharon the first—actually the very end of February and then  
26 immediately, camp wasn't even done, and we went into Khe Sanh. But then we started  
27 bringing the Marines back to Sharon for base security, which kind of worried us that the  
28 Marines would now be pulling base security at an Army LZ because we saw how close—  
29 what they did over there, again, tactics wise. It didn't last very long, but they were back  
30 for several days because we gutted all of our base security at Evans and Sharon. We put  
31 a lot of troops out in the field around Khe Sanh. But for several days, just took all the

1 hilltops and combat assaulted those and took lots of prisoners. Lots of prisoners we took  
2 then. Then probably four or five days later actually went in and had an orderly takeover  
3 at the firebase and didn't stay there very long, though. I'm not sure exactly when but  
4 maybe a week later they shut down the firebase and the Cav left. It was a symbolic thing.  
5 It was a symbolic issue. The North Vietnamese were driven back across the border.  
6 They couldn't freely move up and down their trenches. Again, Marine tactics just didn't  
7 quite work there very well. The air mobile tactics clearly took charge of what was going  
8 on. That's our story and we're sticking to it anyway. You talk to the Marines, they've  
9 got a different story and they're going to stick to it.

10 SM: Yes, sir. Was the—it seems like a lot of the rivalry, if you will, between the  
11 Cav and the Marine Corps was tongue in cheek. Was it?

12 MW: We felt sorry for them, though. It was pitiful. They didn't have good  
13 equipment. They didn't have good tactics. They didn't have good supply. I think that  
14 they were well-trained, they're good American soldiers, but if you would have put those  
15 Marines with Army assets and Army tactics, I just think they would have been a lot better  
16 off. Marines typically, when they made contact, would fix bayonets or hand grenades.  
17 The Cav, when they made contact, they would pull back in, call in artillery, then engage.  
18 So there was a major tactical when they were out in the field, how they did things. That's  
19 an oversimplification, but indeed that's exactly what did happen.

20 SM: Was there very much—working in operations, I would imagine you had to  
21 coordinate or help coordinate activities, support with other branches as well, the Air  
22 Force in particular for close air support. Maybe even the Navy for that. Well, I guess  
23 you were probably too far inland.

24 MW: No, not at all.

25 SM: Oh, you did get Naval gunfire?

26 MW: Oh sure, sure. Especially on lightning bug missions. We were there when  
27 the *New Jersey* was there. We worked with the *Boston*, which was even more  
28 outstanding. *Boston* had radar control, eight-inch guns that were automatically loaded.  
29 Their cyclic rate was very high. So especially on—we'd used them all the time with bug  
30 missions at nighttime. We did get involved with that coordination, yes.

1 SM: Excellent. What was the relationship like between your unit and the Air  
2 Force and then your unit and the Navy?

3 MW: The Navy and the Army speak different amounts of coordinates. There's a  
4 problem there. The Army typically deals in six digits on a map, which is a hundred  
5 meters off and the Navy works in eight digits, which is ten meters. There was some of  
6 that coordination problems, but in general it was positive. The same with Air Force.  
7 There were forward controllers that specifically worked between combat assaults and the  
8 fast fliers to put all those issues together, which didn't happen at the company operations  
9 level.

10 SM: Were you ever in want of support in any mission? That is, you really  
11 needed close air support, but just couldn't seem to find any?

12 MW: Maybe in the A Shau Valley we wished a lot of things would have  
13 happened different there.

14 SM: Okay. That happened later in '68?

15 MW: Yeah, the A Shau Valley.

16 SM: But this is after Tet.

17 MW: Yes.

18 SM: But not before Tet or during Tet?

19 MW: Well, I think if you talked to ground units, they never had enough support.

20 SM: Right. But in terms of—you guys had an infantry element with you, the  
21 Blues.

22 MW: Right, but typically—

23 SM: You also had internal support, that is, the gun ships.

24 MW: The 229<sup>th</sup> had a company of guns. Those guns typically were in support of  
25 either our combat assaults or ready reaction force or strictly gun missions.

26 SM: So it helps a lot.

27 MW: So did we ever wish we had more guns? Of course.

28 SM: Right. But it reduces your reliance on external support for those things.

29 MW: No, we had it internal. Like I said, if a ship was down in the area of  
30 operation, it was really quick. First of all, there were more lift ships around there. There

1 were guns immediately. They'd just stop what they were doing and go. You were never  
2 in the thought process, how long am I going to be out here by myself?

3 SM: What else do you remember about the siege of Khe Sanh and the ending, the  
4 ultimate relief that was brought to the Marines?

5 MW: I thought it was kind of like a skyrocket going off. Looks great going up  
6 and then poof, it's all over with. Where's the rest of the show? They were gone. They  
7 melted back into the mountains so fast, so quick. Afterwards you could see this  
8 tremendous infrastructure of tunnels and ditches and all that crap they dug. They were  
9 within just—very close—within a hand grenade's throw. A lot of the trenches would get  
10 on the perimeter of Khe Sanh. It was amazing. It was amazing. The Marines let them  
11 dig up—or we say they let them dig up to do that. That's what I was probably most  
12 amazed about, tactical differences. Knowing the Cav would have done it differently.

13 SM: Well, after that portion of your involvement of Tet ended, the siege of Khe  
14 Sanh was over, where did your unit go from there? Where did you shift focus?

15 MW: Well, basically, right during that period of time we moved from Evans to  
16 Sharon. Which, Sharon was about fifteen clicks north of Evans. So we were in the same  
17 general area. Then during that time the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigades or the other two brigades of  
18 the 101<sup>st</sup> came over there. Of course, they stayed in I Corps. So we would move out of  
19 the base camp and they would move in it and it was one of those things going on. When  
20 we moved out of Tombstone/El Paso, one of the brigades went in there. So there was  
21 some shifting and there were a lot more assets going up into I Corps, especially the air  
22 mobile assets. So in February or March is when we went into Sharon. That's where I  
23 was actually at from that until I left Vietnam.

24 SM: What was the operational tempo like in that area?

25 MW: It was still pretty intense. Khe Sanh was busy all the way going into the A  
26 Chau Valley. It was very busy. Lots of missions, lots of free-fire zones, lots of activity.  
27 A lot of scattered units after Tet were out there. They were cleaning up. That's why  
28 there was so many free-fire zones up there.

29 SM: Interesting. That brings up a quick question. During your briefings when  
30 you first arrived in-country and then progressively as you became much more involved in  
31 operations themselves, in the S3 shop, what did you witness in terms of—well, what were

1 you briefed upon and then what did you witness in terms of the rules of engagement?  
2 How did they effect the operations that your battalion engaged—your company and the  
3 battalion engaged it?

4 MW: I don't think the rules changed at all.

5 SM: What were the rules as you understood them?

6 MW: Any uniform was a target. Any uniform with a weapon was a target. Any  
7 non-uniformed person with a weapon was a target. There were some changes with  
8 support stuff. Animals like water buffalo, elephant, stuff like that, if you'd see them,  
9 shoot them. Bicycles even. In certain areas it would change, especially when we went  
10 north after Tet. There would be large areas on the map where literally, if anything moved  
11 in that area you would shoot it. Period. So when maybe half the map in your whole area  
12 of operations was in a free-fire zone, there was a lot of ammunition expended. I mean,  
13 literally, if anything moved it was a target. So there were a lot of scattered units and  
14 scattered people. There were a lot of civilians out there I'm sure, too. In the I Corps  
15 right after Tet, lots and lots of free-fire zones. That was one of the things that I was  
16 doing was as those free-fire zones would move, I would move them on the maps and then  
17 the pilots each morning would come in and then move their maps of the free-fire zones.  
18 Then they would be constantly telling the crews as they're flying in and out, "We're in it.  
19 We're out of it." Those kind of things evolved, I would say.

20 SM: Did you find that the rules of engagement prevented your unit from  
21 succeeding in any tactical or strategic ways?

22 MW: Not our specific unit, no.

23 SM: Okay. In what ways? Other ways perhaps?

24 MW: Well, I think like what happened with the Marines up in Khe Sanh with  
25 they couldn't go into Laos or Cambodia, whatever the country was, across the river. I  
26 mean, you could see it was a big mountain on the other side and they had guns dug back  
27 in the hill, but they couldn't go over and take those guns out. I mean that's, tactically,  
28 just brain dead. I think the Cav didn't stay in Khe Sanh because the unit commander  
29 wouldn't allow that to happen. If we can't go there then we're just going to get out there.  
30 I think it was no more complicated than that. So again, tactically and rules of

1 engagement that was set up in the White House was the brain dead part of the deal. But  
2 specifically about how our unit operated, I don't think it was radically affected.

3 SM: When you guys moved and began operating in Sharon—is that correct?  
4 What changed in terms of the operations you conducted? What do you remember most  
5 about operating out of that particular area, in that particular area?

6 MW: Well, Sharon ended up being one of our better base camps because we were  
7 there quite some time and caused it to develop, floors for the tents and that kind of thing.  
8 Ammo crates make your furniture. So when we were there, our operations bunker got  
9 bigger, stronger, deeper. The longer you lived somewhere, your bunkers got bigger and  
10 better. So that was my thought process there. Then as we started evolving into the A  
11 Shau Valley, planning, I think the rest of the 101<sup>st</sup> then like I say was starting to pick up  
12 some of our things that we had finished off. I think that's then why they focused over in  
13 the A Shau.

14 SM: Can you describe some specific operations you participated in?

15 MW: Well, the next one obviously comes up is our operations going into the A  
16 Shau Valley.

17 SM: Was there a specific operational name attached to this portion of your work?

18 MW: Yes.

19 SM: Do you remember what it is?

20 MW: I think it was Pegasus.

21 SM: Okay.

22 MW: I might be wrong on that. But yes, there was an operational name for it.  
23 But obviously the A Shau Valley was the end of the Ho Chi Minh trail, one of the main  
24 junctions coming into South Vietnam. Literally, except for some Special Forces  
25 functions, there had never been any operations around in there. Two main things were  
26 different. First of all, the Cav's *modus operandi* was never get outside our artillery  
27 coverage. Never go into a combat assault that you're not under our Cav's artillery. So if  
28 you had to go farther than that to make a combat assault, you first put up a forward fire  
29 support combat and made a new fire support base that could cover where you're  
30 eventually going to go. A Shau valley, they didn't do this. The thought process was—of  
31 course, it was eighty miles away. It was a long way away. We would have tipped



1 ourselves off if we would have started putting a firebase in near the A Shau Valley. They  
2 would have clearly known what was going on. The A Shau Valley was eight, ten  
3 thousand foot mountains on each side, about a mile and a half of nice valley floor. We  
4 knew that there was a lot of anti-aircraft in the valley. We had heard what it could be.  
5 We had been against a lot of .50 caliber before—small arms and .50 caliber. But we'd  
6 never really been against any true anti-aircraft. They had the radar controlled, rapid fire  
7 37 millimeter and the conventional 85-millimeter flat guns in the valley. Obviously the  
8 air mobile tactics that were developed really weren't ever developed to go into true anti-  
9 aircraft fire. I don't think, anyway. So we were doing two things very differently. For  
10 the issue of surprise, they weren't going to put in a forward fire support base. We're  
11 going to go into a place with known heavy anti-aircraft. It was going to be a big lift.  
12 Now there seems to be some confusion now on the exact lift size going into the A Shau.  
13 I read an operation report that said it was forty. I think a lot of us think that it was more  
14 like fifty-five or sixty that went into the valley. Lift ships plus the accompanying guns  
15 and ARA. But it was a big lift—a lot of helicopters. The first morning, the weather was  
16 so bad the clouds were down to about a thousand or fifteen hundred feet. Because the lift  
17 was so big, they couldn't put all the ships together. We were basically laagered on the  
18 other out—in some big openings in the other side of the A Shau Valley. There was a lot  
19 of confusion. But probably personally, that particular morning of the first day going into  
20 the valley—wait a minute. Wait a minute. That operation was Delaware. I have the  
21 after-action report in front of me on Delaware.

22 SM: Excellent. Okay.

23 MW: At that time David Nessitt was our flight ops officer. Again, we had a  
24 couple days to plan that mission going in there. So that night, as usual the night before, I  
25 made my last minute changes. I had scheduled myself to fly with Dave that day on  
26 Yellow Two. Rocky was flying Yellow One, by the way. I was flying with Dave in  
27 Yellow Two slot. We had an early morning crank, say 5:30 in the morning. As I went  
28 down to the ship, Dave said, "You're not flying today." I said, "What do you mean?" He  
29 said, "You're not flying today." I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "No, you're not." So we  
30 started arguing there. Again, as an NCO, officer rank didn't mean much of anything to  
31 me. It was more of a respect issue. We started literally yelling at each other. "Yes, I

1 am.” “No, you’re not.” “Yes, I am.” “No, you’re not.” Out of the black, Rocky’s voice  
2 popped and said, “Knock that shit off.” So we knocked that shit off and I went back up  
3 the operations bunker. The flight took off that day and Yellow Two never came back.  
4 So obviously to this day, I know that I had scheduled myself on that ship. I knew I was  
5 supposed to be on that ship, but Dave wouldn’t let me go on that ship. A lot of people  
6 had a lot of different ideas why he didn’t and why—typically what I would’ve done if  
7 Major Lane would’ve said something, I would’ve just told the gunner to go away and I  
8 would’ve been gone. But of course, I’ve had all these feelings for thirty-five years. Why  
9 am I still here and why didn’t I go down that day? Last night, I pulled out this old after-  
10 action report and it just so happens this was an operations report from—let me look at the  
11 front of it, here. This is from Colonel Brown to Division Headquarters’ commanding  
12 officer. He talks about in here, talking about the enemy, 23-millimeter automatic anti-  
13 aircraft guns. They used 23s. 85-millimeter division, flat guns, D-44s, 85-millimeter  
14 anti-aircraft guns, assault-issue 85 guns. But then it goes into this—it actually talks about  
15 Yellow Two going down in this report, which is unusual. It didn’t say Yellow Two, it’s  
16 talking about the—I’ll read this to you. It says, “As the aircraft approached the valley,  
17 there were approximately six thousand five hundred foot main sea level. There were  
18 several reports of air burst from anti-aircraft positions on the valley floor. The aircraft,  
19 on the approach to the LZ, were reporting receiving small arms fire and .50 cal fire. At  
20 this time, the gun ships from the 229<sup>th</sup> and 227<sup>th</sup> were not with the lifts of ships due to the  
21 delay in receiving the lift-off time from the TZ (tactical zone). So the six were going in  
22 bare. The 229<sup>th</sup> had the mission of landing the lower LZ and the lead aircraft could not  
23 find a suitable place to set down.” That was Rocky Lane. “Due to the narrowness of the  
24 road and to the high degree of slope of the surrounding area, the hill. The enemy fire was  
25 very intense and the lead aircraft made a go-round. The second aircraft,” that was  
26 Yellow Two, Dave Nessitt, commanding officer, “The second aircraft received intense  
27 fire and was hit, but managed to land its troops in the LZ. Upon departure,” now that was  
28 the first one in the LZ. Yellow Two got its troops on the ground. “Upon departure, the  
29 aircraft again was hit and when trying to return to the LZ, burst into flames and crashed.  
30 Throughout the initial assault, enemy fire was intense and two aircraft were lost.”  
31 Anyway, that’s the aircraft I was supposed to be on that day. So I’ve always had this

1 thought—you hear of other guys with similar type things. How come not me? But that  
2 one specifically is pretty unnerving. I'll obviously carry it to my grave. But anyway, so  
3 going into the A Shau Valley was over the next several days. We lost—I think we had  
4 five KIAs (killed in action) in our company, about five more pretty badly wounded.  
5 Some of them came back, some of them didn't. We physically lost—I think we lost two  
6 ships in the valley and then three more were DXed (direct exchange). Just so bad there  
7 was nothing left of them but they got back or they went down and got lifted out of there.  
8 So the next day in the valley, we only had—I think we put six ships in the valley the first  
9 day. Lost four that day. So that left the company fourteen. We put five or six in the next  
10 day, lost one or two that day. Put us down about twelve ships. Third day, we lost one  
11 ship. Fourth day, we lost one or two. We were down to all of our old compliment of  
12 twenty ships down to seven ships I think after about the fifth day. Now, by that time  
13 already, we'd been getting some brand new hotel model ship into us. They were going  
14 back on line. But we lost a lot. We had a lot of damage. We had a lot of damage. When  
15 you're in a helicopter and you see air bursts out in front of you, I mean that gets your  
16 attention. That really gets your attention. On that day—I brought something else in this  
17 morning—I hope I brought it. Yeah, I did. I wanted to read to you something else.  
18 Later, I received—I won't tell you who this email is from but this is one of the guys you  
19 met at the—I don't think it would be appropriate to say his name, but this is one of the  
20 guys that you met over at the reunion. When I first got in contact with him, he sent me a  
21 long email. A lot of it is this particular day and I'll just read you the portion about the A  
22 Shau Valley. "From the moment the assault on the A Shau Valley began, the"—one  
23 second. Oh, okay. "From the moment the assault on the A Shau Valley began, the radio  
24 was full of talk about aircraft taking hits and getting shot down. All that day, we went  
25 into the LZ after LZ knowing in our minds that it was probably our last sortie before we  
26 got killed. I had never been so afraid in all my life, but we all kept going. By noon I had  
27 taken hits in the rotor blades and seat supports, had developed a pretty good vibration and  
28 was sent back to get a new aircraft. I remember on the flight back praying to God that  
29 none would be available. By this time you had gotten the news that Dave, Dave Nessitt,  
30 had been killed and I asked if there were any aircraft available. You said that one was  
31 flyable, but had not been enough deficiencies but had all been red-Xed and that it

1 couldn't be used on initial assault. It made it possible to refuse the aircraft. I did not  
2 want to go back. So I told you that I wasn't going to take it. I was finished for the day.  
3 You laid into me like no one that I was married to had before or since about duty and my  
4 responsibility as an officer and as a leader in our unit. I took that aircraft because you  
5 made me realize that letting down the unit and my fellow crewmembers was a fate worse  
6 than death. You made me understand that courage was not fearlessness but instead the  
7 ability to function and complete the mission in spite of fear. I think about that incident  
8 every so often, most recently when you replied to my email. I want to thank you for that.  
9 If I succeeded in refusing to take the aircraft that day, I would have regretted it my entire  
10 life. In that respect, you saved my life. Thank you."

11 SM: Wow.

12 MW: I think that gives you really a flavor of what was going on that day and how  
13 the operations ran. I don't guess I really realized it until just last year or so, until I started  
14 talking to some of the folks I was over there with. Just like the comments that Major  
15 Varner then made about me ordering where his tent went up, that rank wasn't really very  
16 important or that it sure wasn't rank as we think about it in the traditional military sense  
17 or about me dressing down a warrant officer about what he should do or how he's going  
18 to go out on a mission or which ship he would or would not take. But I will have to think  
19 to myself that that period from Kontum through the A Shau Valley was very formative to  
20 me in how I do things and that those days were rather intense for about seven or eight  
21 months. I'm still probably a pretty intense person in how I deal with folks and how I  
22 handle things or don't handle things about people giving me excuses. I don't accept  
23 excuses. In Vietnam, we didn't accept excuses. We don't want to hear about ship can't  
24 fly. We don't want to hear about you can't do that. We've got to do whatever we've got  
25 to do to get the deal done. I think that was the prevailing attitude. If you went along with  
26 that attitude, you were fine. But if you didn't, you would be pushed aside and somebody  
27 else would fill your place that did have that attitude. That's why I've had a hard time  
28 accepting (speaks to a person in the room)—hold on one second.

29 SM: Sure. Okay, go ahead.

30 MW: So again, that was an incredible and formative—I'm saying formative, not  
31 informative, but it had a lot of direction on how I conduct my life, I think, and a lot of

1 lessons I learned and didn't learn. I think it has to do a lot about my management style  
2 now, how I do things. I'm a very hands-on type person in business. I'm probably just as  
3 comfortable talking to bankers or out in the shop doing some welding or whatever I've  
4 got to do. I'll do all those things on a hand-on—and Vietnam was very hands-on. But  
5 anyway, the A Shau Valley, that day was bad. It was life changing for me that particular  
6 day. The second day was a little bit better going into the valley. Each day was  
7 successively a little bit better. On the third day was the first day I flew into the valley.  
8 That night, when we came back, you heard the little speech Rocky made about, "Now  
9 we've got to do it again tomorrow morning so buckle up." At that point, officially, Walt  
10 was reinstated as operations officer, but at that point—Walt knew it was a ceremonial  
11 position because I ran operations. He knew that and everybody else knew that. But there  
12 had to be an operations officer, of course.

13 SM: Of course.

14 MW: I was wanting to fly the next day and I started to get in the same argument  
15 with Walt about flying. He said, "We really don't need another demonstration of you  
16 yelling on the flight line tomorrow morning again, do we?" I said, "Probably not." So  
17 Walt didn't fly the third day and he said, "You can fly today if you want." [1:03:36  
18 through 1:02:48 is blank]

19 Stephen Maxner: This is CD number two of the interview with Mr. Mike Ward.  
20 We are continuing the interview on the ninth of May 2003 at 12 o'clock, noon. Okay, go  
21 ahead sir.

22 Michael Ward: So the third day I flew with John Pierce. The third day was more  
23 combat assaults. I always liked to fly with better pilots. I thought, "If I've gotta fly, I'm  
24 at least going to fly with the good ones." I could. I could select who I'd fly with, what  
25 ship, and what pilot. So I got the good ships with the good crew chiefs and the good  
26 pilots. John was one of the best pilots, very skilled, very, very, very skilled, nerves of  
27 steel, good guy. I made sure that the peter pilot that day was good. The first lift going  
28 into the valley—we were actually in the valley that morning, down by the airfield, I  
29 think. As we were going in, we were flying Yellow Three I think. John made a point  
30 about, he said, "Now coming up here over on the right, the guns took out one of the radar  
31 control sites. You'll see it just as soon as we turn around the bend up here." Just about

1 that time, to my left, I saw what he was talking about. Typically the radar-controlled  
2 guns also had two 50-calibers positions on each side of them to protect the radar control  
3 gun from close in stuff. About that time, I saw two or maybe three guy—it happened in  
4 seconds—start climbing up on that .50 and start traversing the .50. It was between  
5 Yellow Two and Yellow Three at that time. I saw the tracer start to swing around on us.  
6 Well, about that time, all the gunners on the right side of the flight saw that .50 and  
7 started working out on it. A half a second later one of the guns came in on it and just  
8 obliterated it. That's typically how it would work. Now the two days before, the guns  
9 weren't there to help. There were just too many of them that day. But John was—not  
10 only was he skilled, but he also was always coaching and talking people through as we  
11 went through on the flight. That made me look where I hadn't been before. It was using  
12 his experience. So as that day went on we continued to take several hits that day. A lot  
13 of small arms stuff. We didn't get hit by any .50 caliber ,but there was a lot of .50 caliber  
14 flying around. I think most of the anti-aircraft guns—no, no, no, for sure they were taken  
15 out by the third day. There was no more of the 37 automatics or the flak guns. They had  
16 been all taken out, but lots of .50s and small arms left. So we flew a handful of combat  
17 assaults that day. We were flying some log later in the afternoon. The ship was starting  
18 to hemorrhage some oil. We were losing I think not oil pressure but we were pouring oil  
19 in the hydraulics almost faster than we could keep it going. We took several hits in one  
20 of the rotor blades late in the afternoon. So we went back to base camp to get another  
21 ship. We received a mission that afternoon to fly another log mission. As we're landing,  
22 the ship had a terrible, terrible vibration in it, just a terrible vibration in it. John was in  
23 big turmoil whether he should red-X the ship, take it back, what do you think? Later I  
24 realized—and he said to me at the reunion. He said, "I was afraid not to go on the ship  
25 because I didn't want to get the same thing"—that the person I just read that email to had  
26 told him about. He said he didn't want somebody else ragging his ass I guess. But  
27 anyway, for a lot of reasons, they flew a lot of times when they shouldn't have been  
28 flying just to get the mission done. But it just so happened there was another ship that  
29 got released early that went and took the log missions and everything was fine. So the A  
30 Shau Valley was a huge success divisionally wise, but it was a terrible thing for our

1 particular company. There was a lot of troops and a lot of folks lost their lives those days  
2 going into the valley.

3 SM: What would you estimate were your unit's total losses as a company or in  
4 the battalion?

5 MW: It was substantial. We actually lost either two or three ships down, not  
6 recovered. We lost another six or seven recovered, not flyable later, red-Xed. Then  
7 every ship had holes in it and was damaged. So over half.

8 SM: Those are significant losses.

9 MW: You're fucking right that's significant. I mean, that was big time, got your  
10 ass kicked.

11 SM: Yes, sir. This is mostly NVA you were fighting up against?

12 MW: Oh, yeah. It was all NVA in the valley.

13 SM: This will end the interview with Mr. Mike Ward on the ninth of May.

**Interview with Mike Ward**

**Session [3] of [3]**

**Date: July 2, 2003**

1           Stephen Maxner: This is Steve Maxner, continuing the interview with Mr.  
2 Michael Ward on the second of July 2003 at approximately 1:35 Lubbock time. I am in  
3 Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Ward is in not Dallas, Fort Worth, correct?

4           Michael Ward: Dallas.

5           SM: Oh, you are in Dallas? Okay, Dallas, Texas. Sir, why don't we pick up  
6 today's interview with a brief discussion of some of your perspectives as you were  
7 preparing to leave country and leave Vietnam. In particular, when you were getting  
8 ready to leave, what did you think about your service in Southeast Asia? What did you  
9 think about the overall American efforts in Southeast Asia?

10          MW: I guess when I was leaving, it got to a point where I was probably just  
11 overwhelmed with the year there and overwhelmed with the intensity of basically  
12 working seven days a week and probably averaging fourteen on a short day and twenty  
13 on a long day. You just kind of get ground down physically and then mentally also. But  
14 time, as our favorite term, was short. As you became short, there wasn't probably a lot of  
15 global perspective on was this a good thing or was this a bad thing. We were all certainly  
16 aware that there was a lot of anti-war protests going on back in the States, but probably as  
17 I'm winding down that's sure not heavy on my mind. I was comfortable with what I was  
18 doing, but I wanted to get back real bad. I was time wise, had one of the offers, if I  
19 would have stayed like I think three more weeks, I would have got out like six months  
20 earlier, or four months early. I wouldn't stay three weeks to get out six months early or  
21 whatever that number was. I think if you had less than six months left on your tour they  
22 would have discharged you from Vietnam, but I just—three more weeks was just an  
23 unthinkable mental situation at that point in time. I just absolutely had enough. Probably  
24 also my unit had gotten in my replacement about three weeks before I left. So my last  
25 three weeks in-country were pretty much stand-down for me. I did very little flying. I  
26 didn't have a lot to do on the operations side since there was a replacement there for me.  
27 I got him trained, but I just couldn't quite fathom another three weeks over there. I



1 wanted to get home real bad. So I passed on that and I clipped my coupons, decided to  
2 come home.

3 SM: Now did you think that the war was going well for the United States and our  
4 allies, the South Vietnamese?

5 MW: Well, as far as I could tell. Each military action we were in, we  
6 overwhelmingly trounced them. There was never a—even when our grunts were in  
7 heavy contact, at the end of the contact and at the end of the day, there were still that  
8 proverbial body counts of ten or twenty or thirty or forty to one. So when you looked at  
9 it just on a scorecard basis, I never saw an action over there and I don't think there were  
10 many actions over there where we didn't just have overwhelming end result superiority in  
11 a given battle or campaign. I wasn't aware of any time—we took heavy losses several  
12 times, but when you looked at the perspective we dealt out extremely heavy losses to  
13 them on a very day in, day out, week in, week out, month in, month out basis. So it  
14 appeared to me, on a military basis we were kicking their butts. That was my view at that  
15 point.

16 SM: Okay. Now, how much had you been hearing about the war as it was being  
17 presented to the American people from letters or hometown newspapers or American  
18 magazines? Not necessarily the *Stars and Stripes* because of course that was produced  
19 by the military. So it might have left out some of the perspectives back on the home  
20 front. When you got back the United States, were you surprised at all by what you saw or  
21 did that help prepare you, seeing some news?

22 MW: I probably saw more before I left than when I was over there. I probably  
23 didn't see a half a dozen copies of the *Stars and Stripes*. Those were usually weeks and  
24 weeks old. When I went on my R&R (rest and recuperation) to Hawaii I saw things, but I  
25 think it's interesting that in that particular year which would have been halfway through  
26 my—I think I went to Hawaii just before the Tet Offensive. I met my wife and saw my  
27 son for the first time. He was born when I was over there. I was just over there, I think I  
28 mentioned earlier, six weeks or two months when he was born. So I saw him. She  
29 brought him to Hawaii. My perspective is the Hawaiian people were completely different  
30 than the mainland people, probably because of Pearl Harbor and because of the heavy  
31 military presence in Honolulu. It wasn't a hotbed of anti-war. To the contrary, I

1 remember one of the times my wife and son, we went and ate at what was for that time an  
2 expensive restaurant. It was a thirty-five or forty dollar bill for a very nice seafood  
3 dinner. When I asked for the bill, the waiter said, "It's been taken care of." I said, "What  
4 do you mean it's been taken care of?" He said, "That gentleman over there took care of it  
5 for you." I looked over there and he was, I don't know, fifty-five or sixty years old. He  
6 had a wife of similar age sitting at a table. I got up and came over and said, "Do I know  
7 you?" He said, "No, but I know what your doing over there and we really appreciate it."

8 SM: Wow.

9 MW: I think that was a general feeling in the Hawaiian Islands, probably because  
10 of the military presence there. But they were much warmer to us. During my time over  
11 there and when I came back for my R&R, I didn't see a strong anti-war presence. Never  
12 was there a word in any of my correspondence to home about something like that. So I  
13 was probably very insulated as far as that goes.

14 SM: Well, how did you feel when you left Vietnam as far as—?

15 MW: Well, they just about didn't let me go because I think I weighed 133  
16 pounds.

17 SM: Oh, my.

18 MW: When I went over there I think I weighed 185 or something like that and  
19 I'm 6'1". So at 131 pounds, that's a fifty pound or so loss and I was pretty emaciated.  
20 Not because I was misfed, mistreated or anything else. Just the lack of calories and the  
21 tremendous temperature and a lot of sweating going on all the time, I was just very, very  
22 thin. When you're leaving and they give you a venereal disease check and a general  
23 physical, as they're shuffling us through lines very fast, somebody looked at my weight  
24 and looked at my chart. There was a little conference about it with a couple of doctors or  
25 nurses or whoever was doing this exit physical about my weight. They asked, "How are  
26 you feeling?" I said, "I'm fine. I'm getting out of here." "Well"—I said, "Don't even  
27 think about it. I'm hitting the next plane. I'm gone." But I was, I was just—at 131  
28 pounds, I was just really very, very thin. So I was just glad to get on the plane and start  
29 heading back.

30 SM: Absolutely. Well, what would they have done?

1           MW: Well, they were talking about, “Do we need”—I think the chitchat that I  
2 didn’t completely get, “Do we need to ground him for a few days in the hospital and get  
3 some calories in him and get some pounds back on him?” Because I was very—

4           SM: You’re a tall guy. You’re over six feet aren’t you?

5           MW: I’m 6’1”, right. I weigh 205 or 210 now and at that time I probably weight  
6 185, something like that. So when I was 133 or 31 pounds. I was thin. But when I got  
7 back, anything I would touch or eat or feel, the pounds came right back on. Because my  
8 normal weight is way up there. So I was just lacking calories. It’s just not much more  
9 complicated than that. A lot of energy—you know, it’s mass balance—energy in and  
10 energy out and this was all going out and not much going in over there. I remember I got  
11 all the classic things about how they—the theory at that time was to get you out of there  
12 as quick as you possibly can and get you home as quick as you possibly can and of course  
13 they’ve learned from that it’s not the right way to go. I think I left Vietnam on July third,  
14 which was I think July second here or the fourth or somewhere. I came back into the  
15 Seattle processing center, Seattle/Tacoma. The plane gets in there at like one o’clock at  
16 night or two o’clock in the middle of the night or something like that. You get a real  
17 quick records check and they put you through a line where they put you—and people on  
18 that plane were dressed anywhere from literally civilian suits and most guys had jungle  
19 fatigues on and jungle boots. A few dress uniforms from guys coming out of Saigon and  
20 that kind of stuff. Most of the guys didn’t have anything left. You had lost basically all  
21 your goods when you were over there—lost, destroyed, disappeared, who knows? I don’t  
22 even remember where they all went to, but you literally had what was on your back and  
23 that was all. So I remember it struck me at 2:30 or 3:00 in the morning where they’re  
24 fitting you up for a new uniform. For the first time this is actually a tailored uniform.  
25 This isn’t throw it on, it fits, you’ll grow into it or you’ll grow out of it. They were  
26 actually tailoring uniforms in the middle of the night. You’d see these ladies sitting at the  
27 sewing tables. There were thirty-five, forty-five, fifty year old women just happy.  
28 Everybody was very jovial and they were sewing your patches on and getting you all  
29 ready to go and putting you in a fresh dress uniform. Then you went to a chow hall  
30 where they had two things—either lobster or steak and all the other rich foods. You  
31 know, the ice creams and milks and stuff that you never saw over there. By about 4:30 or

1 5:00 in the morning, inside two or three hours, they'd put you in a brand new, beautifully  
2 tailored uniform on, the only one I ever had. I needed one at 131 pounds or whatever I  
3 weighed then. By 4:30 or 5 we were on a bus to take us to the Seattle Tacoma airport  
4 which was the private way to get out. When I'm at the Seattle Tacoma airport, standing  
5 in line to get my ticket, I'm looking across the way and I see Major Varner there, my  
6 number one CO that we talked about a little bit earlier. He was on the opposite line  
7 getting a ticket to go home. I knew that he was behind me by six or seven weeks and so I  
8 got out of line. I had had plenty of time. I walked over there and we shook hands and  
9 talked. I asked him "What are you doing here and how'd you get out early?" He said,  
10 "Well, I've got me a good assignment. I'm going to West Point to be an instructor  
11 there." So he was headed to West Point to be an instructor. We shook hands and said  
12 goodbye. Next time I saw him was April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2003 in Charlottesville, Virginia.

13 SM: Wow. This reunion.

14 MW: Yeah, at that reunion and lost all contact with him. So I get back in line,  
15 get my seat and at that time my wife was living in Kansas City under the somewhat wing  
16 of my mother who lived in Sedalia, Missouri, outside of Kansas City. I had a brother  
17 living in Kansas City. So I got a ticket from Seattle to Kansas City. My posting out of  
18 Vietnam was Ft. Benning, Georgia. That's all I knew at that point in time. I got on the  
19 plane at Seattle time, it's eight, or nine, or ten o'clock. It was an early morning flight. I  
20 get in Kansas City late in the afternoon at the old downtown Kansas City airport. My  
21 wife was waiting there. We had a real nice hug and we're walking down the aisle way—  
22 and this is a shutdown airport now—and for some reason she didn't want any other  
23 family members to be there. She wanted to be the one to welcome me home. My brother  
24 snuck away from work and he came out and saw me. So we got in our car and drove  
25 home and had a real nice leave. I had the proverbial thirty days off. The next day I think  
26 was July fourth or fifth. I think I got home on July fourth or right around there some  
27 time. At the airport, my brother said, "Well, you've got to come down to the lake"—the  
28 Lake of the Ozarks in Missouri. "I got me a new boat." He had like a thirty-two or  
29 thirty-three foot Chris Craft Cabin Cruiser. "Oh, boy, that sounds great." So I spent that  
30 night at my mother's house and the next morning we go down to the Lake of the Ozarks.  
31 The fireworks went off and I hit the deck of the boat and everybody's looking at me like

1 “What is your problem?” A few days later, just maybe a week later, for some reason, I  
2 was on Interstate 70 going between Kansas City and St. Louis—actually between St.  
3 Louis and Kansas City, about halfway, around Columbia, Missouri. As I’m driving down  
4 the highway—it was a divided four-lane even back that far—I glanced to my left.  
5 Somebody was passing me. I looked real close and I thought, “Boy, that looks familiar.”  
6 I turned my head and looked real clearly. It was Rocky Lane and his family, my second  
7 CO.

8 SM: Your second CO, yeah.

9 MW: Rocky. So I sped up and we waved and he pulled over and we hugged and  
10 we met each other’s family and, “What are you doing?” and yadda yadda ya. Rocky was  
11 on his way to the West Coast to catch a plane. He was posted to Hawaii. So we were  
12 about a forty-five minute or an hour drive from Sedalia to my mother’s house. So we  
13 agreed to post-pone his trip and come to Sedalia. We spent that afternoon at my mom’s  
14 house. I introduced him to all my family and his family. We had a real nice chat there. I  
15 think he stayed all that night and left the next morning. I lost track of Rocky and didn’t  
16 see him until the Charlottesville reunion, April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Excuse me, no, no, no, no, no.  
17 I saw Rocky two years earlier at a Vietnam Crew Members Association meeting in  
18 Louisville. That’s right, I’d seen Rocky. So that was my thirty-day leave. It was a good  
19 leave. I go down to Ft. Benning, Georgia, and check in. By that time my 131 pound  
20 frame was probably 150. I probably put twenty pounds on in that month and the uniform  
21 didn’t fit. I didn’t have anything to check in with and that was an interesting deal. As  
22 I’m checking in, I knew that Bill Paris was down there. You remember Infantry Lt. Bill  
23 Paris at our reunion?

24 SM: Oh, yeah. I started interviewing him as well.

25 MW: Well, I knew Bill Paris was down there and of course Bill Paris was kind of  
26 our adopted infantry lieutenant of our aviation company. I knew he was at Ft. Benning.  
27 So as we’re leaving—we had similar dates—he said, “You be sure and call me.” So I  
28 called him as soon as I got to Ft. Benning and he said, “Don’t check in.” I said, “What do  
29 you mean?” He said, “I’m at the officer’s infantry candidate school and I think I could  
30 get you in here and it would be a great posting for you.” I said, “Well, I’m supposed to  
31 check in tomorrow morning.” He said, “No, don’t do it.” He said, “I know it’s going to

1 take me two or three days so don't check in for at least three days." I said, "I'll be late by  
2 three days." He said, "Don't worry about it. I can handle it." I said, "Okay." So I took  
3 that time. I don't know what I did but anyway, we fooled around for three days more and  
4 I checked in. Of course I was three days late and they said, "Where've you been?" and  
5 all that and yadda yadda ya. But there was a note and they said, "Oh, I see you're posted  
6 at the infantry officer's candidate school." I said, "I am?" "Oh, yeah." "Oh, okay,  
7 what's that?" So Bill had evidently spoken to the commanding officer of the school and  
8 told him about me and said that it would be great if we could get me involved in it. So  
9 anyway, when I checked in they already had a slot for me. I think that afternoon I went  
10 over there and I spent my last six months in the service or five months in the service at Ft.  
11 Benning, Georgia, with one of the most cush jobs in the military at the officer's candidate  
12 school down there. A lot of our other Vietnam friends were over at Savannah Army  
13 Airbase, Walt Levering and several other guys that were at that reunion there. We would  
14 drive back and forth across weekends and we got to meet each other's wives and continue  
15 more of a stateside camaraderie when we got to meet each other's families. That's how I  
16 spent my last six months in the military, at Ft. Benning.

17 SM: Okay. Now did you have any aspirations whatsoever of staying in.

18 MW: No, no, no, no.

19 SM: All right.

20 MW: No, no, no, no.

21 SM: All right. Maybe it was a ludicrous question, but I had to ask it.

22 MW: Yes. Yes. Actually, there were several times in the military where they try  
23 to sit you down and talk to you. By the time they got to know me, they would say,  
24 "We're not even going to have that talk because we don't want to waste our breath with  
25 you because we know that there's nothing that's going to keep you in here." But it does  
26 remind me that one of the things that the infantry officer's candidate school was really  
27 big on and that was having awards and decorations ceremonies. As best I remember,  
28 there were twenty-six classes going all the time. Every two weeks there was a new class  
29 coming in. They would get all twenty-six classes' companies out on the grinder pad and  
30 have these gargantuan awards and decorations ceremonies probably at least once a  
31 month, maybe more often than that. Of course everybody in the school was a return

1 Vietnam veteran. That's all they wanted there. If you weren't a veteran of Vietnam, you  
2 weren't qualified to go into the school. There might have been an exception or two in the  
3 two or three percent for some special reasons, but basically it was all recently returned  
4 Vietnam vets as the cadre there. I don't know whether it's always done this way or not,  
5 but it just happened that at this particular awards and decorations ceremony there was  
6 probably six or seven guys up on the stage. As a buck sergeant I was at the end of the  
7 table or the end of the stage. I don't remember the name of the three-star general, but it  
8 was either the first or fifth Army, which is the Eastern United States. Whatever army that  
9 is in the Eastern United States was at Ft. Benning for the awards and decorations  
10 ceremony. He was pinning the medals on and he was shaking everybody's hand. There  
11 was a colonel at a podium reading off the citations. I think there was a captain or a major  
12 handling a little boom mike. So they got down to me and they did the deal and pinned  
13 this thing on me. The general starts to walk the stage to give his little speech and the  
14 colonel says, "Ahem, excuse me, Sergeant Ward has another decoration, sir." So he  
15 comes back and they read off the second one, yadda yadda yadda ya. He pins it on me,  
16 shakes my hand and starts going back to the stage. He says, "Excuse me, General So-  
17 and-so, Sergeant Ward's got another decoration here." So after the fourth time of this  
18 going down there and all the senior officers getting some minor little things, he shakes  
19 my hand and says, "I don't guess there's possibly anything else you could ask for today,  
20 is there?" I looked at him and I said, "Yes, sir, a discharge." This was on the PA system  
21 and this broke out several hundred people from the formations, laughing and pounding  
22 themselves on the ground. This was not a good thing to do to a three-star general in front  
23 of twenty-six companies of infantry officer candidates. So it wasn't but probably an hour  
24 or two hours later and I was in front of—I believe he was either a full colonel or a one-  
25 star general who was the company commander of the infantry officers candidate school.  
26 He was telling me about how inappropriate this was and all the terrible things they were  
27 going to do to me and all this kind of stuff. He says, "Well, I guess we can not go  
28 through the drill of talking to you about extending, can't we?" I said, "I think that's  
29 probably a pretty good idea, sir." At that time I think he said, "Get out of my sight," or  
30 something like that and I left. But when you brought up the thing, "Did they ever talk  
31 about extending?" Well, that's why they didn't talk about extending with me, I think.

1 SM: Well, when you did get out of the military, what were your plans? Did you  
2 have any solid plans yet?

3 MW: Yeah, yeah. I was going to back into business for myself. I was in  
4 business for myself before I went into the military and it probably took me all of two  
5 weeks to be back scratching myself again. That's basically what I've done all my life is  
6 be in business for myself. So that was my *modus operandi*.

7 SM: Did you have anything in particular in mind as far as a business or you just  
8 knew no matter what it was going to be self-employment?

9 MW: Well, I don't even remember what the thought process was at that time, but  
10 I knew that I could always do better for myself than I could working for somebody else,  
11 especially Uncle Sam. Although I cleanly and clearly understood what we were doing in  
12 Vietnam and why we were there, I didn't understand the stateside military at all because  
13 it was just exactly the opposite obviously, especially going from an assault helicopter  
14 company to an infantry officer's candidate school. I mean, it's more than night and day.  
15 It's outer space, inner space. I mean, those are just—oh, you just couldn't get anything  
16 farther apart from each other.

17 SM: Well, in what ways did your Vietnam War experience affect your outlook on  
18 life and the activities that you engaged in shortly after getting out of the military?

19 MW: Well, it probably affected me more than I'll ever know. Everybody that  
20 knows me well tells me how much I changed in Vietnam. I said, "How?" They, "Well,  
21 you're more serious now," and words like that. I perceptively can't tell how it changed  
22 me, but I know that it profoundly changed me and I know that the relationships that I had  
23 with people profoundly changed me. Specifically, instances of how you lead and  
24 motivate people, how you make judgments on people, how you get things done the  
25 quickest and most easily with the least amount of grief, worth, loyalty and trust with  
26 people. There's a lot of military terminology and things when you talk or is common in  
27 military when you talk about loyalty and leadership and those qualities and how that  
28 affects business and how I like to surround myself with people that I feel are extremely  
29 loyal or extremely trustworthy. To a lot of degrees like that of how I see things. I've  
30 gotten criticized many times how I view raising children, discipline, and things like that.  
31 That probably has affected me in how I do a lot of things in life.



1           SM: Now you already mentioned that some people have said that you seem more  
2 serious, but how has the war affected your personal relationships with people and as you  
3 just brought up, your thoughts about child rearing and discipline and things of that  
4 nature?

5           MW: I guess one of the things that is clear to me as far as military discipline  
6 goes, when the rubber meets the road, you don't have time to explain. That's discipline.  
7 When a crisis hits, you don't have time to go through the niceties of why you're doing it  
8 and yadda yadda yadda ya. You need instant action. I can think of times in my life when  
9 my kids have thought I was way too strict on them or expected way too much out of them  
10 and how they reacted on certain things. I can also think as they've grown older, when  
11 they've come to have perspective and say, "I'm really glad, Dad, that you did so and so  
12 because it kept me from this happening to me later on in life." I think that getting serious  
13 in Vietnam—I went to a ten year class reunion and nobody knew me. They said, "Boy,  
14 you're a bore-ass. You were the class clown." They didn't use the word class clown, but  
15 I was yack yacking all the time and the same things with my college friends. They said,  
16 "Boy, what's happened? You're a different person." I probably am a different person.  
17 But it was a year-long perspective change of very hard, dedicated work, pulling together  
18 as a team. It's a life-changing experience when you do those kind of things over there  
19 and rely on other people and they rely upon you as much or more. There's no room for  
20 error. There's no room for mistakes. There's no room for second chance. There's no  
21 room for yada yada ya. You do it right the first time, every time, with no excuses and  
22 that's how you live and come back from there. If you don't, that was no excuse. That's  
23 how I do business. It's done right the first time, no excuses, no yadda ya. If you can't do  
24 that, go somewhere else. So it sure has changed my focus and perspective on things.

25           SM: As you went forth and were working for yourself and going into business,  
26 did you find it difficult to talk about your Vietnam experiences or did you shy away from  
27 it as a topic of discussion with people?

28           MW: I don't think it was either, or. My family, the people my friends, the ones  
29 that were around me, it was a non-issue. All of the anti-war hoopty rah, although I saw it  
30 on television, since I didn't associate with anybody like that, it wasn't very close to me.  
31 It was in the TV and on that, but I made sure that I didn't go around people like that

1 because I didn't want to get into a confrontation. Probably to this day I'm the same way.  
2 I'll just stay away from people. What are they called? Ultra left-wing people. That's the  
3 term they use today. I just stay away from them because of what I would consider a very  
4 liberal view on things and how the liberals tend to be on those kind of sides of things. I  
5 just don't associate with those folks and I stayed away from them. So it really never  
6 affected me too much. I would say it's probably affected other people more than it has  
7 me because if I ever learn—I've probably done things in my life where—well, let's just  
8 skip that.

9 SM: Okay. Let's see. You said it was a non-issue with family and friends. Was  
10 it just a topic that wasn't brought up or did you find that people were kind of apathetic or  
11 were not interested in it? Especially as the war continued after 1968 and '69, Nixon  
12 came in. Eventually the Vietnamization, the downsizing, and basically we're getting out  
13 of this thing.

14 MW: Well, I never bought into the Vietnamization. I knew that wouldn't work  
15 or I believed it would not work. I didn't know, but I couldn't see how it worked. I mean,  
16 we took Vietnamese units on combat assaults twenty-five, thirty-five, forty-five times  
17 when I was over there. I don't know, a lot. The most impressive thing was how many  
18 pigs and chickens and things that they could carry in the combat assault wing which told  
19 me their mind was in the incorrect mindset of how to do that. Where our guys saw how  
20 much ammunition and water they could carry in, they saw how much fresh food they're  
21 going to get to barbeque that night. So I couldn't ever believe that they would be  
22 successful in fighting the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, which were very serious  
23 warriors. It just wouldn't work. As that went on I started accepting in my mind that this  
24 could have a very ugly ending now, very ugly. Did I answer your question?

25 SM: Yes, sir. I think you did. Did you ever find that, not necessarily  
26 immediately after you came back from Vietnam, but all the way through say to before the  
27 Gulf War, through the 1970s and through the '80s, did you find that people would react  
28 differently to you if the subject of Vietnam came up and the fact that you were a Vietnam  
29 veteran was brought up in conversation? Did you find that people would react or respond  
30 to that in a different way or in different ways?

1           MW: If I was scoring it, I would say it was much more positive than negative,  
2 even early on. Now it seems to be kind of a light trendy thing to be a Vietnam veteran.  
3 It's not such a bad deal quite now. Since the Gulf War, obviously. That flipped  
4 everything. That just absolutely flipped everything. But before that, I would say I  
5 always got much more positive. I'll say it again. I don't tend to associate with left-wing  
6 type people or ultra liberals. Those are the people that tend to have those type views.  
7 When I would hear about somebody that went to Canada, I can assure you I was not  
8 around them at a cocktail party. It just wouldn't happen. So I won't put myself in a  
9 position knowingly for a conflict with somebody like that. So that's how I've handled it.

10          SM: What did you think, going back to 1975, what did you think about how the  
11 war ended?

12          MW: I don't want to use the word devastated, but it was terrible. It was terrible.  
13 To this day, I don't want to think that everything was in vain and I don't think it was.  
14 Have I talked to you about some of my Chinese business associates and their thoughts on  
15 the Vietnam War and what they were doing?

16          SM: No, you have not.

17          MW: Well, I've always taken the general view. In the last five or eight years  
18 have taken a harder view on that even what we did wasn't obviously a clear-cut victory in  
19 any stretch of the imagination, the end result was exactly the same or almost. One of the  
20 major thought processes about Vietnam was the domino theory. That's been just, "The  
21 domino theory, the domino theory." I believe that there probably could be a very, very  
22 well documented case today that the domino theory was a hundred percent correct. In  
23 fact, we kept the domino theory from happening. As you're aware of, I think, Steve, my  
24 core business is involved with importing automotive things out of mainland China. I've  
25 spent a few man years in mainland China over the last twenty years. I started going there  
26 in 1984 when the Red Guard was still on the street a little bit. I've seen a profound  
27 change in the Chinese society, government, industry, people. That's twenty years or so  
28 almost. I've made many close ties over there, any, many, many close ties. I know lots of  
29 people over there. The people my age now were Vietnam age back then. So the Chinese  
30 are absolutely fascinated that I was in Vietnam and fascinated with what I did and love to  
31 talk about it. Most of the people that I deal with now are senior something people. Either

1 they're the senior people in a factory or in the government or somewhere now because  
2 they're forty-five to sixty year old folks. These are the people running China now.  
3 Because I've been over there so long there's so many of them that know that I was  
4 involved in Vietnam that when they'll introduce me to somebody else on another trip,  
5 they'll say, "Oh, Mr. Mike was in Vietnam. He was with a helicopter unit over there,  
6 yadda, yadda, ya." So it's a very, very common thing to talk about at dinnertime with  
7 them. In the last few years, I've been saying, "Tell me, what did you do during the  
8 Vietnam time?" To a man, I've never talked to one that wasn't involved some way in the  
9 Vietnam War. If they were in a military unit, if they were in a factory job, if they were in  
10 a government job, they were somehow doing something for Vietnam. Their whole  
11 existence in life at that point in time when we were over there was basically some—I  
12 shouldn't say a whole—but it's more than common to run into people that their job was  
13 to drive a supply truck to the rail head for ammunitions going into Vietnam. Their job  
14 was working at an outboard—I remember two people I met that worked in the only  
15 outboard motor factory in China. They make several diesel, but throwing gasoline.  
16 Literally a hundred percent of their little outboard motors, which I take are like fifty or  
17 eighty cc motors were all being shipped to Vietnam for running up and down the canals  
18 and the rivers. Their factories were running twenty-four-seven to try to keep up with the  
19 need. It goes on and on and on and on. They were all somehow involved with supplying  
20 and helping the brethren North Vietnamese. It didn't cripple the country, but it stopped  
21 them from looking elsewhere. Later it proved out that the Chinese and Vietnamese were  
22 not real good friends, that the Chinese really didn't have time to support, Pol Pot or get  
23 involved in that too much. They had to back away from Thailand. They were consumed  
24 with supporting North Vietnam. They didn't have time to do any other mischief that they  
25 would have liked to have done. At that time they were in an incredibly political phase of  
26 China where their industry was just getting going, they were just starting to be  
27 mischievous but much like the Russians, we spent them under the ground. So I think that  
28 there was a domino effect that our involvement, although we didn't have a strategic  
29 victory in Vietnam, which I mean Vietnam as a strategic situation, went communist after  
30 we left. That surely wasn't a victory, but the big picture of communism being contained  
31 stopped over there. If we weren't over there and we wouldn't have done that, there

1 would be a very different thing. I would love to have the time left on this earth to sit  
2 down and document that because I know it's a fact now. Can't prove it yet, it isn't  
3 documented, but from all my dozens to maybe hundreds of evening conversations with  
4 Chinese and what they were doing during the war leads me to believe that it's not  
5 anything except fact that that's exactly what the whole country was involved with, was  
6 supporting North Vietnam. They didn't have time or energy to do anything else or the  
7 ability to get into any other mischief. So now you can mark that down this date that this  
8 is the Mike Ward Theory of the Anti-Domino Theory. (Both laugh)

9 SM: Okay. Well, it's actually—there are a number of other people that share  
10 your view that I've talked to.

11 MW: Oh, really?

12 SM: Oh, yeah. In terms of—not necessarily based on the specific experiences  
13 you've had with talking with Chinese, but—

14 MW: If you run across people like that, I would love to chat with them.

15 SM: I think it was one of the former presidents of Singapore that made a  
16 comment very similar to that on the opposite side, that it was because of the American  
17 involvement in Southeast Asia that the other countries around Vietnam and around  
18 Southeast Asia were able to solidify their free market capitalism and democratic systems.  
19 If that hadn't happened, yes, the domino theory very well could have.

20 MW: Right. Right.

21 SM: So it's kind of the flip side of the coin that you just outlined. So what about  
22 Americans? You seem to obviously have some very interesting conversations with these  
23 Chinese business friends and people you met in your business. Did you ever have  
24 interesting and engaging conversations like that with Americans that either served or  
25 participated in certain events surrounding the Vietnam War?

26 MW: Probably not because like I've iterated earlier that I tend to stay away from  
27 left-wing folks that I could be in a negative conversation about. So no, I haven't. No, I  
28 haven't.

29 SM: Just curious.

30 MW: I understand.

1 SM: In the early part of your time back, let's say from 1968, when you got back  
2 in July of '68 to the end of the war, did you ever personally witness any really negative  
3 anti-war activity or anti-veteran activity, anything that was offensive?

4 MW: If I did, I've blanked it out. What I said back in Vietnam, I've got to really  
5 think about the bad stuff. I only remember the good stuff. I think that's probably the  
6 same thing I would've—I stay away from those kind of things. I don't associate with  
7 people like that so I don't—and if I did it wasn't catastrophic to me. If I saw it, it was a  
8 bunch of dumb shits and just lightly played it off. I've had a few conversations at—  
9 what's it called? Senior business level type folks where I couldn't pick my company  
10 very well. Some academia started in on things about Vietnam and a couple times there  
11 were people that went to Canada. I usually have a pretty pat answer for those people. I  
12 say, "Well, you have no choice but to continue with the same view or you have to admit  
13 what a fool you were when you went to Canada now, wouldn't you?" That just every  
14 time it just shut them down right in their tracks. Because the people that did go to  
15 Canada, if they still weren't on their soapbox, they would have to admit that they did a  
16 bad thing when they went there. They're not about to do that.

17 SM: That's a good point.

18 MW: That's happened occasionally, but that's more fun than not.

19 SM: Do you think that—well, before I talk about some broad questions about the  
20 American people in the Vietnam War—in the 1980s, when the Vietnam Veterans  
21 Memorial Fund raised enough money and erected the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial, the  
22 Wall in D.C. Have you visited that and what do you think of that, if you have, what do  
23 you think of that monument?

24 MW: Yes, I have, many times. It's very stirring. It hurts. When you say it, I  
25 mean—I don't know if I can articulate very well my thoughts except to say that I donated  
26 heavily to the Wall. I was glad when it was done. I was glad with the concept. I think  
27 the design of it, the execution was great. The theory of how they've done it, how they've  
28 run it, how they lay out, I've got no complaints except everything positive to say. Every  
29 time that I go to Washington—I shouldn't say every time—nine out of ten times when I  
30 go to Washington, and I do go there usually several times a year, I've got to stop by and  
31 go by and say hi. The last time or time before I was there, it must have been in the spring

1 because there were a lot of tourists there. As I'm walking out of the Wall, there was a  
2 gentleman, maybe thirty-five. He had two boys, one maybe seven or eight and one  
3 maybe nine or ten. As they're walking down the path, one of the little boys looked up to  
4 his dad and said, "Daddy, what was Vietnam about?" His dad looked down to him and  
5 said, "Son, I don't know if I can explain it to you or not." I don't think probably most  
6 people at thirty-five can explain anything about it or touch on it. When I go there it's  
7 interesting to hear people's opinions of things. Maybe my ears tune up and listen to  
8 people around me as they talk, but it's interesting. I'm going to be there this month and  
9 I'm going to be visiting the Wall this month. One of my co-workers here, we're  
10 introducing a new vehicle to law enforcement in Washington D.C. on the twenty-third  
11 and twenty-fourth of this month. We're staying an extra day and one of these gentlemen  
12 that works with me here, he said, "Mike, I want you to take me by and show me the  
13 Wall." I said, "Sure." I don't know whether if I can—healing is not the right word, but  
14 it's great glue. It's great glue. It keeps the thoughts and memories all together. It's  
15 positive there, not negative.

16 SM: Now, do you think that we as a nation have learned all we can from our  
17 Vietnam War experiences?

18 MW: I think we've learned all we can in this generation. I just hope it doesn't  
19 get lost down the road. I think when we look at all the—I can say all the upper and  
20 senior officers in Desert Storm were all Vietnam lieutenants and captains and they  
21 learned. But are we going to forget? Let's hope not. But we surely learned from that  
22 group of people, starting at Colin Powell. So yeah, we took the—I think we've learned  
23 our lessons well over there with that. We transmitted them at least into the senior  
24 leadership as of this time right now we're in. A hundred years from now, I don't know.  
25 Let's hope so.

26 SM: Well, what do you think about some of the more recent American  
27 deployments, in particular the first Gulf War, this most recent war in Iraq and other  
28 American deployments around the world, whether they be some of the more, I guess,  
29 controversial, I guess would be a way to put it, controversial policies like what we did in  
30 Somalia or versus in Bosnia, peacekeeping operations, that kind of stuff?

1           MW: Well, I think it's proven any time we don't go in strong with our gun  
2       cocked we're okay and if we don't do that, we're going to get in trouble like Somalia. I  
3       guess it's pretty well known knowledge that President Clinton didn't want armor to go in  
4       there for among other reasons, it looked too provocative. Well, a bunch of APCs  
5       (armored personnel carriers) and tanks running down to pull those pilots out, they might  
6       be here today. So if we've learned the lesson, if we're going to go do it, let's go do it to  
7       win quickly the first time. But have we done that every time? No. But our system is a  
8       system of political leadership. Some leaders learn better than others. By the time he's in  
9       the White House, there's not much we can do about it then.

10          SM: No. Is there anything specific or anything in particular that you would want  
11       to identify as probably the most important thing we should keep in mind or we should  
12       learn from our Vietnam War experience?

13          MW: Don't go unless you're prepared to go in to win with overwhelming force  
14       and do it or don't go.

15          SM: What would you say were the most important ways the war affected you  
16       personally, whether they be personal in terms of your outlook on life or spiritual or  
17       religious, whatever?

18          MW: That would take a lot of deep reflection and I don't think we have time for  
19       that today.

20          SM: Okay. Good enough. Good enough. Maybe it's a question we can revisit  
21       some other time. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about today?

22          MW: No, not that I can think of right now.

23          SM: All right, excellent. Let me go ahead and put an official ending on our  
24       interview then. Thank you very much, Mr. Ward. This will end the interview with Mr.  
25       Michael Ward.