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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Tom Esslinger
Conducted by Dr. Richard B. Verrone
August 21, 26, 2003
Transcribed by Shannon Geach**

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

1 Richard Verrone: This is Dr. Richard Verrone and I'm conducting an Oral
2 History Interview with Mr. Tom Esslinger. Today is August 21, 2003. It's
3 approximately 8:33 AM Central Standard Time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of
4 Texas Tech University in the Special Collections Library interview room. Mr. Esslinger,
5 where are you located?

6 Tom Esslinger: I'm in Lake Manassas, Virginia, just outside Washington DC.

7 RV: Okay, very good. Sir, let's start with some biographical information on
8 yourself. Could you tell us when and where you were born and a little bit about growing
9 up?

10 TE: Well, I was born in Ephrata, Pennsylvania in 1943. Ephrata's a small town
11 in Lancaster County, sometimes referred to as the Pennsylvania Dutch country. I was the
12 middle child of three. A family that was pretty middle class. I had an older sister and a
13 younger brother. I went to a public school there in Ephrata, Pennsylvania, small public
14 school system until my junior year when I went to Valley Forge Military Academy for
15 two years.

16 RV: Tell me about growing up there in that area. How much of an influence was
17 the Pennsylvania Dutch culture upon your family and growing up?

18 TE: It was always there, it was always present. They are very noticeable in life
19 in Lancaster County. Other than that, it didn't have a whole lot of effect. I really didn't

1 have much contact with them until when I was about eight. My father bought a general
2 store in a small town. A fair number of the customers were either Amish or Mennonite
3 so I had some face-to-face contact with them then. Then later when I was a late teenager
4 or in college, I spent a summer working in the sheet metal shop at the company my dad
5 worked for. There were actually a couple of Amish working with us there; that was kind
6 of unusual especially since older Amish don't even believe in machinery. But some of
7 these guys felt like they needed to make some extra money. So I worked next to them
8 and got to know them. I actually spent a couple weeks one September helping them
9 harvest their tobacco. That was the hardest I ever worked.

10 RV: Tell me what your parents did for a living.

11 TE: My father was basically sort of mid-level executive for a boiler company that
12 made boilers. He was at various times sales manager, general manager, production
13 manager, and that kind of thing. As I said at one point he actually quit work and bought
14 this general store. After he ran it for about a year he realized he couldn't make a living
15 doing that so he went back to work. My grandparents ran it during the day and then he
16 and I ran it at night and on weekends.

17 RV: How about your mother, did she work?

18 TE: No, just a housewife.

19 RV: Tell me about your education. Did your parents put a great deal of influence
20 on your education and excelling in school?

21 TE: I don't think an extraordinary amount. Obviously they wanted me to do
22 well. I always did well. It's kind of a mystery. I was by far the best student of the three
23 kids. I don't know exactly why. Doing well in school was always important to me. I
24 was very successful at achieving in school.

25 RV: What were your favorite subjects? Do you remember?

26 TE: Gee, I was very good at math, although I wouldn't say that was my favorite
27 subject. As I got older and took science courses, they appealed to me a lot, the labs and
28 so forth.

29 RV: Did you attend the public school system all the way through there and in
30 Pennsylvania there? When you got to high school did you remain in the area?

1 TE: Yes, in fact high school was only a couple blocks from my house. We
2 actually went to that building in seventh grade so I was there for four years before I spent
3 the last two years at Valley Forge Military Academy in Wayne, Pennsylvania.

4 RV: Okay, did you participate in sports?

5 TE: Yes, I did.

6 RV: What were your favorite sports activities?

7 TE: Well I think baseball probably was my favorite, but I played football and
8 basketball as well. I was good enough to play on the teams, but I certainly wasn't a star.
9 When I was younger that was a source of some chagrin to me, because sports was really
10 the most important thing in my life. Even at an early age, seven or eight years old I was
11 an avid fan of baseball and knew all the statistics and that sort of thing. I actually at one
12 point said, and I was sincere, that I would gladly have traded fifty points off my IQ for
13 fifty points on my batting average. (Laughs) It always bothered me that I wasn't better
14 at athletics and that I was sort of resented by some of the athletes because I was better at
15 school than they were.

16 RV: What sports did you play in high school? Did you actually participate on the
17 teams?

18 TE: Yeah, football, basketball and baseball.

19 RV: Did you do this a lot at Valley Forge?

20 TE: No. When I went to Valley Forge, the reason I went was I had an uncle who
21 was superintendent of schools in another district. He felt that the school district I was in
22 wasn't challenging me so he pushed us to send me to a private school but of course my
23 dad couldn't afford that. Through friends I heard about the fact that the Valley Forge
24 Military Academy had a band that they were very proud of, which they gave
25 scholarships. So I applied for that and I actually did get a band scholarship to go to
26 Valley Forge for the last two years of high school.

27 RV: What instrument did you play?

28 TE: I'd play an instrument if I couldn't play sports. I played the drums. It's kind
29 of a funny story. My mother wanted me to play piano and so forth. I didn't want to. We
30 reached a compromise. I would take music lessons if she let me play the drums. I took a
31 few lessons but I was never really all that accomplished at it, but I was kind of showy. I

1 think the reason they gave me the scholarship to Valley Forge was more on my
2 academics. I was there in this band with all these serious musicians, a lot of whom were
3 taking lessons from musicians in the Philadelphia Orchestra and so forth. I really wasn't
4 much of a musician, but I managed to hang in there with them, got an education for two
5 years. Later on I was in the band at Yale and got a trip to Europe out of it. So I got a lot
6 out of very little input in my music career.

7 RV: Now did you start on the drum set or were you actually just playing the
8 snare drum?

9 TE: I was playing the set. I never owned a set of drums. I just did it on wooden
10 blocks and so forth. Then at school, I would use their drums. Early on I became a bass
11 drummer. At Valley Forge that's what I did, I played the bass drum.

12 RV: You had a band scholarship and that paid your way through your eleventh
13 and twelfth grade years.

14 TE: Correct.

15 RV: That's great. Tell me about the jobs that you worked. Sir, are you there?

16 TE: I didn't hear that question.

17 RV: Yes, sir, what jobs did you work during your youth? What kind of work did
18 you do?

19 TE: Early on I started working in my dad's store checking people out at the
20 counter and restocking shelves and helping him with the books. Then when I was
21 sixteen, I spent the summer working on roofs, as a roofer's assistant. Very hot and dirty,
22 dangerous job. The summer after that I worked in construction. Then in the ensuing
23 summers during college I worked for my dad's company in the factory and the shop, the
24 sheet metal shop on metal and forming it into jackets for boilers and such.

25 RV: That's a lot of labor-intensive work you did. Now when you went to the
26 military academy, how did you adapt to that military lifestyle, that eleventh and twelfth
27 grade year?

28 TE: Actually very well. I was kind of surprised by that because I remember on
29 the way down when my dad was dropping me off I asked him what was going to happen
30 if one of those guys gave me a hard time and I punched him out. He said, "Well you just
31 better not." It's kind of a funny story because about two and a half weeks later my

1 parents were invited to come down there. That's when most of the cadets reported, but
2 the band had reported early so they really weren't supposed to be invited. I wasn't
3 supposed to see them until Thanksgiving, but they came. Since they were there they
4 allowed me to talk to them for a few minutes. My dad told me later, "We never should
5 have seen you. Your mother was a nervous wreck the whole way home, she was crying."
6 I said, "Why?" He said, "Because you were a nervous wreck. You were looking over
7 your shoulder. You were biting your fingernails. You were obviously really worried.
8 She didn't like to see you like that." I said, "How did you feel about it?" He said, "Well
9 it actually kind of pissed me off." He said, "Because I tried for fifteen years to scare the
10 shit out of you and couldn't do it. It only took them two weeks." Adjusted very well.

11 RV: So you took to it really well?

12 TE: Yeah, I mean it wasn't fun. After I was there I was sort of sorry I agreed to
13 go. It was much more rigorous and much more disciplined and much more time
14 scheduled life than I had been used to. There were a lot of things that normal teenagers
15 are doing and I had been doing that I wasn't able to do. I actually adapted to it pretty
16 well.

17 RV: What was the academic life there? Was it more challenging to you as your
18 family hoped it would be?

19 TE: Yes, it was. In fact I think it's fair to say that if I hadn't gone there and had
20 the counselor that I did, never would have even thought about applying to schools like
21 Yale and Harvard and Princeton.

22 RV: Right. Let me ask about military influences in your life as a youth. Was this
23 your first experience with that kind of military influence? Did any of your family
24 members, aunts, uncles anybody serve in the military?

25 TE: My father did not. He was a little old for World War II. In fact his company
26 converted into manufacturing airplanes, so he was important to that. I had an uncle who
27 served in World War II. I would talk to him periodically. Of course in a small town like
28 that, there were fairly elaborate parades on Memorial Day and Fourth of July and that sort
29 of thing. So I like most kids got to watch the old soldiers parade around and so forth.
30 Really that's about all.

1 RV: Did you have an idea that you wanted to go into the military or was this
2 something that happened once you had gotten to Yale?

3 TE: I sort of always felt like I would probably do a couple years in the military. I
4 really wanted to be a doctor. I was convinced that I was going to be a doctor. In fact at
5 Valley Forge, they had the ability to send two kids to the service academies, to West
6 Point or Annapolis on what they called honor school appointments. I won one of those,
7 so I actually had the opportunity to go to West Point. The reason I didn't was that I was
8 convinced that I wanted to be a doctor. It just didn't seem to make sense to go there for
9 four years, and then be in the Army four or five years and then try to go to med school
10 and all that sort of thing. My father, when he found out that they actually paid you to go
11 to college there and I turned it down he was not real pleased with that. That was the
12 reason I did.

13 RV: Do you regret that decision today?

14 TE: Actually looking back on it at some point while I was in the military, I
15 decided I didn't want to be a doctor. Recognizing how successful I always was in the
16 military yeah, I sort of wished it turned out the other way really.

17 RV: So tell me about applying and getting into Yale. Why did you get into Yale?

18 TE: Well, I got very high College Board scores. I was on my way to becoming
19 valedictorian in my class at Valley Forge. My English teacher was my counselor. He
20 knew me pretty well and he said he thought there wasn't any reason why I couldn't get
21 into an Ivy League school. So I applied to Yale and Harvard and Princeton and Cornell I
22 think. My back up was Bucknell. I got into all of them but Yale offered me the most
23 money, it was a scholarship.

24 RV: Was it a full ride scholarship or was it a partial scholarship?

25 TE: It was most everything. Actually it was kind of neat. Normally what Yale
26 did at that point was if you needed financial aid the first thing they would do is give you a
27 job. Then they would give you a loan. If you still needed more they would give you a
28 grant. But they had ten scholarships a year they handed out. They called it the Yale
29 National Scholarships that they gave to people who had particularly good records up until
30 then. I was given one of those. It was actually sponsored by General Stackpole who was
31 a former general in the Army who ran the Stackpole Publishing Company in Harrisburg,

1 Pennsylvania not far from my home. As a result of that, I didn't have to do a job and I
2 didn't get the loan. It was all grants.

3 RV: How was Yale for you? Was it challenging academically or did you adapt
4 and do well?

5 TE: It was extremely challenging. I think I could say that I adapted, but not well
6 and certainly not right away. I remember being told by people, "This is going to be
7 completely different from military school. There's going to be a lot of freedom, you're
8 going to have to be disciplined." I thought, "No problem." I got there and found out that
9 I could do whatever I wanted to, whenever I wanted to and nobody cared. So I did not
10 apply myself as well as I should have. I also didn't have any help picking courses, so
11 the courses I picked my freshman year were just the hardest courses I could find. I was
12 pretty shocked when I got there to find out that I couldn't just show up at class and just
13 wow everybody with my brilliance. As a result I quickly learned that I had to apply
14 myself. It took me a while to get into that routine but I finally did.

15 RV: What year did you enter Yale?

16 TE: Nineteen sixty-one.

17 RV: You went ahead and graduated right?

18 TE: Yep.

19 RV: In '65?

20 TE: Graduated in '65 and during my senior year—when I went to Yale I said, "I
21 want to be pre-med." They said, "We don't have a pre-med major." They said, "You
22 just take these four science courses and major in anything you want." I did that, then I
23 applied to medical schools in my senior year. The med schools all said, "You can't be
24 serious. We don't take political science majors." I was kind of shocked and chagrined
25 but I was still convinced I wanted to be a doctor. So I signed up for an extra year at Yale
26 after I graduated as a special student and took four or five more science courses. It was
27 toward the end of that year that I was sort of tired of school. I said to myself, "It doesn't
28 make any sense to go to med school if you're already tired of school." Since it was
29 during the Vietnam War, other options weren't many. I had not done ROTC (Reserve
30 Officer Training School) at Yale because I had already gotten credit for the first two
31 years of ROTC from Valley Forge. While I could have joined as a junior by that time I

1 recognized compared to what I had been used to at military school, ROTC at college was
2 kind of Mickey Mouse. So I didn't sign up although I did get to know—there was a
3 Marine officer there who was a major then. His name was Leon Utter, subsequently was
4 a battalion commander in Vietnam. He sort of liked me, and I sort of liked him so I sort
5 of kept my hand in that way. Then one day I think it was May of 1966, I got on a train
6 and went down to New York and went to the Marine recruiting office and signed up.

7 RV: Just kind of spur of the moment?

8 TE: Well, I'd been thinking about it for a while obviously. But yeah, I didn't talk
9 to anybody about it or anything I just made my decision and did it.

10 RV: Tell me what the climate on the campus was like in the early sixties there.
11 Vietnam obviously had not heated up that much. But you had the Gulf of Tonkin in '64
12 and the commitment of troops in '65. What was it like there in New Haven?

13 TE: It was very different. My wife graduated from college in '69. I think things
14 had changed by then. Our class, on campus there were the usual political activities and
15 so forth. In fact, I was very active in the Yale political union. To give you an example,
16 in the Yale political union the biggest party was the conservative party. Sure, there were
17 liberals and so forth but it was a pretty relaxed in that area. The ROTC was fine. Those
18 guys wore their uniforms to class and stuff and it wasn't a problem.

19 RV: Okay. Why the Marine Corps?

20 TE: Having been in the band, which was sort of the elite unit at Valley Forge
21 Military Academy, I learned the value and the importance of being in an elite unit and
22 having an esprit de corps that bonded you together. I sort of figured, based on the Marine
23 Corps reputation if I was going to end up going and fighting I wanted to be worried about
24 the guy out in front of me, and not whether the guys each side of me were doing their bit
25 or not. So I figured the Marine Corps was the best for me.

26 RV: What had you heard about the Marine Corps that made you think that the
27 esprit de corps and things were different with the Marine Corps?

28 TE: I'd seen the movies and read the books about World War II. Probably was
29 influenced by the Marines Corp's very active and very successful public relations
30 campaign, which pushes that image. I think at that point, being strong and being a tough

1 guy was really important to me. I sort of figured if I could join the Marine Corps and
2 could become a Marine that would certainly certify me as a legitimate tough guy.

3 RV: So when you signed up, what happened after that? How long did you have
4 before you had to report? I'm assuming you went to OCS (Officer Candidate School) at
5 Quantico.

6 TE: That's correct. I signed up in May. They told me I was going to OCS in
7 October of 1966 and I did. I finished that academic year at Yale, which was almost done
8 anyway. Spent that summer actually as a counselor at a boys' camp in upstate New
9 York, then I came back and during all that time I concentrated on getting myself in tiptop
10 physical condition. On October 10, 1966 I reported to Quantico.

11 RV: Tell me what your first impressions of Quantico were.

12 TE: Because they were pushing classes through as fast as they could we got sent
13 out to Camp Upshur, which was a very remote camp in which the barracks were all
14 Quonset huts. It was pretty primitive. I remember after they processed us in at main side
15 we got on buses and went out there. As we got off the bus there was this relatively slight,
16 relatively small gunnery standing there with his feet about three feet apart and his hands
17 in his hips and Smoky the Bear hat on, started barking at us. Every guy that has ever
18 joined the Marine Corps has gone through that experience. I sort of looked at him and
19 thought, "Oh my goodness. It gets serious pretty quickly here. This may be a mistake."
20 But I learned very quickly the longer it took him to figure out who you were, the better
21 off you were. So I just did what I was told and kept my head down.

22 RV: Did you try to blend in as much or lead?

23 TE: Well I thought I was just trying to blend in. It became obvious pretty quickly
24 that other people thought I was leading.

25 RV: Really? What happened? How did they know this?

26 TE: The way they rate you in the Marine Corps was at OCS and basic school,
27 which was a five month course that they give you infantry officers afterwards. It was
28 part on academics; I think that's like 25 percent, part on physical, which is another third,
29 I think. The rest is in what they call leadership, which is basically based on when it
30 comes time to rate people on leadership your peer's rate you basically. I always did very
31 well on that, much to my surprise and to my delight. I knew I wasn't going to have any

1 problem excelling in academics in this area. But to be able to do as well as I did
2 physically and in a leadership area, against what I considered to be very tough
3 competition in that area, really was very satisfying.

4 RV: Looking back, what did you do during that basic course there at OCS to
5 establish yourself as a leader? What qualities did you exert?

6 TE: You know that's hard to say. You rotate opportunities to be in charge of a
7 platoon for a day. I guess just the fact that I was paying attention to whatever was being
8 taught and was absorbing it quickly. Therefore I was fully comfortable applying it to the
9 situations that were presented to us. Plus I gave 100 percent all the time at everything.
10 That must have been noticed by other people. It's hard to describe what makes you be a
11 leader and what makes other people respond to it. When I went there I was convinced
12 that leaders were born, not made. It was just something that God gave you. The Marine
13 Corps taught me very definitely that leadership can be learned and they do a tremendous
14 job of teaching it I think.

15 RV: How did your family feel about you being in the military and the Marine
16 Corps?

17 TE: They were not happy. My mother got practically hysterical when I told her I
18 joined the Marine Corps. My father's reaction was more phlegmatic. He just said, "I
19 don't understand it. You know you did well at Valley Forge; you had a chance to go to
20 West Point. Instead you go to Yale for five years and then you go in the Marine Corps?"
21 So they were a little chagrined about it I think.

22 RV: What about your siblings?

23 TE: Well, my brother actually was in the Air Force at the same time I was. He
24 actually went to Vietnam before I did. It was sort of a sudden assignment and he was
25 only there a few months. But they were fine with it.

26 RV: What did you know about Vietnam at this point going in, in October '66
27 when you go into Quantico? What did you know about what the United States was trying
28 to do there and accomplish in Southeast Asia?

29 TE: I didn't know a lot. But I probably knew more than the average boot Marine
30 because I had taken a Southeast Asia history course at Yale and had learned a little bit
31 about what the history of that area was and a fair amount about the current situation.

1 Looking back I had, it seems to me, almost no understanding of what was going on.
2 Since I've gotten out I've probably read 90 percent of the books on Vietnam, including
3 the ones on how we got there and the political decision and so forth. That made me
4 realize and I've been back twice. That made me realize that I really didn't know what
5 was going on and certainly didn't understand anything about the culture of the people
6 over there and the way it's different from ours.

7 RV: Yes, sir.

8 TE: In fact I think it's pretty obvious to me that hardly anybody in the country,
9 our country, appreciated the cultural difference including the president and his advisors.
10 That was part of the problem.

11 RV: Right. Let's talk about Quantico. What was your typical day like there?

12 TE: About 4:30 in the morning, shine shoes, shine brass, clean up the area, get
13 ready to greet the day. I think reveille was about six. After that everything was
14 formations and highly scheduled until it was lights out at twenty-two hundred, ten
15 o'clock at night.

16 RV: How did you handle the physical parts of the training?

17 TE: I handled it very well. I never regarded myself as being tops in that area.
18 That's why I had prepared myself so well before I went. That summer before I went I
19 would get up and run six miles every morning. Then after I worked all day I would run
20 six miles at night. I got myself in pretty good shape. So it was very rigorous, the
21 physical part. But I felt like I was in better shape to start with than most of the guys.
22 That enabled me to handle it a little easier and a little better than they did. Probably in
23 runs for example, I would usually finish near the front. That was probably one of the
24 things that helped me to do as well as I did on the physical part.

25 RV: You said academics were no problem?

26 TE: No. I do say though that I had gone to some good schools. The quality of
27 the instruction, almost all of the courses were taught by Marine officers or Marine NCOs
28 (non-commissioned officers), who were not professional teachers although they had
29 received; before they did that sort of thing they would get a course in techniques of
30 military instruction. But in terms of the way they packaged the material and the way they
31 facilitated learning, it was by far the most effective teaching learning experience I had

1 ever been involved in. I say that because I remember saying to some of the instructors as
2 we were having all this stuff crammed into our heads, that I wasn't confident that when I
3 got to Vietnam and needed some of this material that it would be there. They said,
4 "Don't worry about it, it will be." They were absolutely correct. It's just amazing. You
5 get to Vietnam and you get in a situation and say, "Gee, I need to call in artillery or I
6 need to call in air or this and that." You knew how to do it because the instruction had
7 been so effective.

8 RV: Were these instructors Vietnam vets themselves? Had they been over in
9 country yet?

10 TE: Most of them had been, yes.

11 RV: Did they talk to you about what to expect over there? What they had been
12 through?

13 TE: Yes.

14 RV: Do you remember what they told you?

15 TE: I don't remember specifically but I remember the tone of it was this was a
16 very different kind of war. It was being fought under rules of engagement which made it
17 difficult and that it was an officer's responsibility to see to it that the troops adhered to
18 those rules of engagement. That there was no front line and that you were sort of always
19 on, which was true.

20 RV: I was going to say, did that turn out to be true?

21 TE: Absolutely. You know we had a Vietnam village built down near Quantico.
22 We would go in there and run programs through there, exercises. You just can't be
23 prepared, I don't think, for the atmosphere and the situations that we found in Vietnam.
24 They try and they did a good job of trying. But training is not the same as the real thing.

25 RV: What kind of weapons training did you have?

26 TE: It was pretty extensive. Practically every kind of infantry weapon from the
27 pistol right up through the 106 recoilless rifle, then of course how to use artillery and so
28 forth. We had some firing experiences with all those weapons. Everybody had a chance
29 to fire at least some rounds from every one of those weapons. Actually it was pretty
30 good.

1 RV: Did you have a favorite weapon; something that you were really proficient
2 with?

3 TE: I had done very little shooting before I went into the Marine Corps. I was
4 really pleased with how well I did in pistol and rifle qualifications. I've got a good story
5 for you there. I'm basically left handed. So we went to the range and we spent a week
6 on rifle training and qualification. I fired the rifle right handed. For some reason I'd
7 always done that. I found it easier to close my left eye than my right eye. So it made
8 sense to shoot the rifle right handed. So I did and I qualified high expert. So the next
9 Monday we go to the pistol range. I go to the drill instructor and I say, "I've got a
10 question. I'm not sure whether I should shoot the pistol left handed or right handed." He
11 said, "Well are you left handed or right handed?" I said, "Well I'm left handed." "Then
12 why wouldn't you shoot the pistol left handed?" I said, "Well I can only close the left
13 eye, not the right eye and I qualified expert shooting the rifle right handed." He said, "I
14 don't know. Just do whatever feels okay." So I shot the pistol left handed and qualified
15 high expert. I'm sure that DI (drill instructor) is around still talking about the goofy
16 lieutenant who qualified with the pistol left handed and the rifle right handed and shot
17 high expert in both.

18 RV: Now is that how you fired the weapons in Vietnam?

19 TE: Yeah.

20 RV: That's interesting. Very interesting.

21 TE: I really liked the .45 pistol. That of course is what I carried in Vietnam all
22 the time. I'd have other weapons sometimes. I had that .45 with me all the time.

23 RV: Why did you like it so much?

24 TE: I don't know. It just felt good in your hand. It was heavy enough that it
25 really felt substantial. It was real easy to take care of. It performed well under very
26 adverse circumstances over there. The M-16 you get a little bit of dirt in the chamber and
27 it might misfire. But the .45 never misfired.

28 RV: What would you say was the most challenging aspect of your time at
29 Quantico?

30 TE: I think the physical aspect of it. I mean the mental pressure was great. In
31 terms of the academics and so forth that was not a problem. The physical was significant.

1 I remember at Quantico they have the hill trail, the infamous hill trail you hear about.
2 You sort of go up and down seven or eight hills, half the time it's a little muddy and
3 slippery. The hikes are on that thing with full pack and everything rigorous. I remember
4 the first one, my bunkmate and myself, his name was Morrison Warren. He'd been a
5 defensive tackle at [Stanford]. He and I were doing pretty well physically so the gunny
6 took us aside and said, "You guys are going to be my stretcher bearers." That meant we
7 each carried a stretcher. We were at the back of the column with him, but it meant we
8 didn't have to carry our rifle and a bunch of other stuff. We thought it was kind of easy
9 duty so we volunteered for it every march. That was great until one time about half way
10 through the hill trail, some guy broke his ankle. Then we had to put him on the litter and
11 carry him for the rest of the way. They laughed at us the whole way. It was pretty
12 rigorous really.

13 RV: How long did the training last there at Quantico?

14 TE: Ten weeks for OCS and a week or two off around Christmas. In early
15 January reported back for five months of the basic school.

16 RV: Describe the basic school. What was that like?

17 TE: Well, you're all second lieutenants. You're not treated as discourteously as
18 you are in officer candidate school. Still you're all second lieutenants. You're not really
19 officers yet. You're trained by other officers. There's a fair amount of academics. They
20 have a separate campus there at Quantico called the basic school. It's pretty nice
21 barracks and so forth. We ran through a lot of practical exercises, going out on patrols,
22 nighttime ambushes, night compass marches. Just an instruction in all the various skills
23 you need to be an effective Marine platoon commander in the infantry.

24 RV: Were these instructors also Vietnam veterans?

25 TE: Most of them.

26 RV: Did they train you as such, knowing that you all were probably going to
27 Southeast Asia?

28 TE: Yes. When I was in the Marine Corps there were two kinds of Marines,
29 those who'd been to Vietnam and those who were going. There wasn't any question
30 that's where we were going.

31 RV: How did you feel about that, knowing that you were going to this war zone?

1 TE: I was excited about it. One of the reasons I joined the Marine Corps was I
2 figured that we were involved in my generation's war and I didn't want to miss it. Yet at
3 the same time—I remember having mixed feelings. For example I remember being at the
4 basic school in April and May of 1967 when the Marine Corps was involved in the hill
5 fights around Khe Sanh.

6 RV: Yes, sir.

7 TE: For some reason based on the Marine Corps success there, rumors started
8 spreading the war was all but over. I remember having very mixed feeling about that.
9 On the one hand, I didn't want to miss it. On the other hand, I was scared to death about
10 what it would be like. The prospect of relief of not having to go was also present. So I
11 was sort of conflicted really.

12 RV: Tell me some of the things that they taught you in basic school to prepare
13 you for Vietnam.

14 TE: In terms of preparing you for Vietnam, living outside, living out for several
15 days at a time and over night and so forth. Navigating through heavily vegetated areas
16 like forests and so forth, compass marches and so forth. That stuff was very effective and
17 very important. Use of supporting arms, artillery and fixed wing aircraft, how to use
18 helicopters in conjunction with infantry units. They also had in addition to—they had an
19 obstacle course that got you into top physical condition. They ran you thorough what
20 they called a confidence course, which was basically putting a small group, maybe four
21 or five guys together. They had sort of a set up there where you had a number of
22 different problems, sort of like brainteasers. You had certain equipment and you had to
23 get across a river and there was no bridge or something like that. Those were very
24 effective in not only developing teamwork, but building your confidence and also finding
25 out who the natural leaders were.

26 RV: Were you kind of pushing your way or naturally making your way to the
27 front again as a leader?

28 TE: Not consciously I don't think. Even before then and certainly since, I
29 abhorred leadership vacuums. When a group of people get together and a decision needs
30 to be made and nobody wants to do it, that just drives me crazy. Or they want to try to do
31 it by committee. I certainly do now and I must have done then, when I see that kind of

1 situation I step forward and take charge. Most people are delighted that somebody's
2 willing to take the responsibility and make the decision.

3 RV: Let me ask you about being a Yale graduate. Did they expect more from
4 you being an Ivy League Yale graduate? Were you all just Marines?

5 TE: There was a certain amount of reverse snobbism there. I took some grief
6 about that. They sort of acted like they expected me to be an intellectual nerd. Maybe
7 they expected me to do well academically because of that. Of course I did, so that wasn't
8 a problem. I think they were pleasantly surprised by how well I did in the physical and
9 the leadership stuff. For example Marine Corps and OCS are different from basic school.
10 There was this pugil stick competition. Are you familiar with that?

11 RV: Yes.

12 TE: You have a big long stick that's got pads on each end. You're basically
13 sparring with other people. It's designed to sort of teach you aggressiveness and utilize
14 your bayonet drills that you've learned with the rifle. They would do a series of man on
15 man matches until they produced a winner. I won the pugil stick competition among six
16 hundred guys. I think that sort of shocked the DIs, that some Yale would do that. I did
17 it because I figured out that what they were trying to teach you aggressiveness. A lot of
18 guys, for example I went up against my roommate, the defensive end from [Stanford] was
19 much bigger and much more athletic and much stronger. Everybody thought he would
20 kill me. As soon as the whistle blew he gave me a head fake, by that time he was done.
21 Because when the whistle blew I just attacked until I won. I think that was noticed also
22 by both the staff and the other lieutenants.

23 RV: What specific things do you remember once you were in the field in
24 Vietnam, that you said, "Okay, this is like basic school. This is exactly what they taught
25 me. I need to draw on this right now."

26 TE: The most important, because it was the most important thing that junior
27 officers did in Vietnam was the use of supporting arms. How to call in a fire mission,
28 figuring out which kind of artillery usually you were getting, and coordination of that
29 with fixed wing air support. That was a practically daily requirement in Vietnam in the
30 field. It is somewhat complicated. Again confidence and becoming competent in the use

1 of those supporting arms was absolutely essential to being a successful officer in
2 Vietnam.

3 RV: So when did you finish basic school? Do you remember which month?

4 TE: Yeah, May of 1967.

5 RV: Where did you go from there?

6 TE: While we were in basic school they gave us the Army language aptitude test.
7 They picked out of the 650 of us, the twelve highest scores and sent us to the Defense
8 Language Institute West Coast in Monterey, California to learn Vietnamese. So I spent
9 that summer, about three months in a very idyllic situation living in the BOQ (bachelor
10 officers' quarters) at the Presidio of Monterey, going to school six hours a days with
11 native Vietnamese instructors. As soon as I was done, within twenty minutes after I was
12 done, I was on the golf course every afternoon. Of course we were close to San
13 Francisco, so it really was a pleasant three months.

14 RV: How did you take to Vietnamese? Was it difficult?

15 TE: It wasn't as difficult as I expected. We had very good instructors. It uses
16 our alphabet. So I took to it pretty well. The hardest part of course is that the language
17 has tones, six different tones. So the word that looks the same, the same spelling can
18 mean six different things. Picking up that is difficult. The fact that we had native
19 instructors six hours a day certainly helped on that.

20 RV: How fluent did you become?

21 TE: I got to the point where I could carry on a conversation in Vietnamese and
22 had a reasonably good vocabulary. When I got to Vietnam, a lot of the guys that had that
23 level of training ended up in intelligence or something, but I didn't. And I was glad I
24 didn't. I didn't want to be in intelligence. I didn't really use it on a day-to-day basis. I
25 did use it occasionally in Vietnam. I always say we'd get into a village and I'd get the
26 troops to pull all the villagers together. They were all nervous and tense. Then I'd start
27 speaking Vietnamese and they would just crack up. Here was this six-foot American
28 talking Vietnamese with a Pennsylvania Dutch accent and they thought the circus had
29 come to town. It broke the ice and enabled me to get information from them. Then one
30 time in May of 1968 we were running patrols out into the mountains, west of Da Nang
31 and my company ran into a NVA (North Vietnamese Army) regimental artillery

1 headquarters, which was there on the reverse slope of the map and because that's where
2 they used to rocket the Da Nang Airbase. After we overran the minimal defenses that
3 they had there we were searching through all this stuff and we found a bunch of writings.
4 It was all in handwriting, but it was very legible. I was able to figure out that one of the
5 things that I had gotten was an operations plan for the second phase of the Tet Offensive
6 which was due to go off in about ten days.

7 RV: Wow.

8 TE: Once I figured out that's what it was they got a helicopter out there
9 immediately to get it. That resulted in compromising a lot of their efforts when they
10 kicked off the second phase of the Tet Offensive. It actually illustrated one of the
11 problems, one of the advantages we had over the NVA who were highly trained and
12 highly motivated and great fighters. They didn't have the flexibility we did because they
13 didn't have the quality of communications we did. Even though the commanders of that
14 regiment must have known that their plan was compromised, what they did was they sent
15 out two and three man groups with a couple of rockets. At midnight on May fifteenth
16 they were supposed to be at a certain point and fire their rockets at Da Nang. Well,
17 they'd already left. They were on their way and they were not able to be recalled. Most
18 of them met with ambushes when they showed up where they were supposed to.

19 RV: Do you think the language training that you received more Marines should
20 have gotten that or more actual American personnel going into country should have
21 gotten that training?

22 TE: No, I don't think that would have been particularly valuable. For the first
23 half at least of my tour I was with the 3rd Marine Division up north near the DMZ
24 (Demilitarized Zone). We didn't have all that much contact with the natives there. Most
25 of the areas we operated in were free fire zones. They had been cleared of the local
26 population so we didn't really run into a lot of Vietnamese. So that wouldn't have been
27 of much use. If we were going to give more training to everybody that went over, it
28 wouldn't have taken three months. It should have been in the culture and history of
29 Vietnam as far as I'm concerned.

30 RV: Right. That was my next question. How much training did you receive and
31 your peers receive about the culture of Southeast Asia and Vietnam?

1 TE: Minimal, minimal. I'm sure there were a few things told to us but I don't
2 remember them. Knowing what I know now I look back and say I would have been a
3 much better platoon commander and company commander in Vietnam if I had
4 understood the culture and what was going on better. Probably goes without saying the
5 same is true all the way up the chain of command all the way up to and including the
6 president. I'm convinced. I've met with Robert McNamara, I've read his books. I've
7 talked to a lot to these guys. They were not bad guys. They were doing what they could.
8 Lyndon Johnson thought that if he ratcheted up the pain that the North Vietnamese
9 administration was feeling, that would cause them to quit. Nothing could have been
10 further from the truth. That was not a state secret. Ho Chi Minh had already said that if
11 it took ten years or twenty years or thirty years they'd outlast us because they were not
12 going to let us beat them. Sooner or later we'd get tired of it. That's exactly what
13 happened. An awful lot of what we did played right into those hands.

14 RV: Can you give me some examples of you on the ground in Vietnam where
15 more cultural training would have definitely helped you?

16 TE: Yeah, I mean, especially the second half of my tour when I was with the 1st
17 Division, down around Da Nang. We were fighting a war in and among the people. I
18 mean I would have had a much better understanding of how to treat a village for example
19 if we were doing a search and destroy or a cordon or county fair or whatever if I would
20 have understood more about their religion, their culture, their veneration for old people,
21 their attachment to the land. The ways in which their society, the values and traditions of
22 that society differed from ours. I mean I know we did lots of things that must have
23 grossed them out and really irritated them. We weren't doing that to irritate them. We
24 were trying to influence them to win their hearts and minds. In a lot of cases we were
25 doing just the opposite without realizing. Just a small example, sort of humorous
26 example at one point I had a Chieu Hoi guide, one of these guys that had defected from
27 the NVA or the Viet Cong and was now a scout for us. I had that same one for a little
28 while and he spoke English reasonably well. I spoke some Vietnamese so we could
29 communicate pretty well. I started learning a little bit more about Vietnam from him.
30 One of the things I told him Americans really think that the fact that the Vietnamese any
31 time they need to urinate or defecate just sort of step off to the side of the road and do it,

1 it's pretty gross. He said, "Well we think the fact that all you guys go and put your butt
2 on the same place to do it is pretty gross." Just little things like that. Particularly the
3 veneration for older people and the attachment to the land were things that we just didn't
4 understand well enough and with a little bit better understanding could have been much
5 more effective and much less obnoxious.

6 RV: Do you think that the United States military and the civilian leadership at
7 deciding about putting Americans in harm's way do you think this kind of cultural
8 training has improved for American forces or do you have an idea about that?

9 TE: I think it has. It probably still isn't good enough. As far as I'm concerned,
10 Americans still think that the rest of the world must think and react to stimuli the same
11 way they do. I still see that in decisions that our politicians make for example. Now
12 that's just not true. Actually McNamara when I heard him speak a couple of years ago,
13 somebody asked him a question about what they call country studies at the State
14 Department. He went on for long time about that. It used to be that the State Department
15 had people who basically studied the cultures and the civilizations and the histories and
16 society of different countries around the world. If we were ever in need of information or
17 were thinking about dealing with or operating in that country they were very valuable
18 resources. But over the years, with budget cuts and so forth most of those programs were
19 shut down. Even now today we don't have the quality on that area that we used to in the
20 State Department. The rest of the government doesn't have that resource to draw upon.
21 Just an example McNamara said that during the Cuban Missile Crisis that either he or
22 President Kennedy was always with Llewellyn Thompson who had been a long time
23 diplomat in Russia, had been an ambassador there, had been one of the State Departments
24 country study guides on Russia. He said that was invaluable in defusing of that crisis
25 because Kennedy would want to send a message to Khrushchev. So he'd say, "I'm going
26 to do this." Thompson would say, "No if you do that the way Khrushchev is going to
27 interpret it the opposite of the message you want to send him." McNamara said that
28 having that input was absolutely essential to defusing what was otherwise a very volatile
29 situation. That's just an example of where we did have the kind of understanding of the
30 culture that helped us. We certainly didn't have it in Vietnam. In fact the professor I had
31 at Yale taught that Southeast Asian History course, named was Rowe, R-o-w-e. He told

1 us that he had been consulted by the Kennedy administration and made certain
2 recommendations on things they should do in Laos and Vietnam and they did the
3 opposite.

4 RV: When you finished in Monterey, this is what, August of '67?

5 TE: Yes.

6 RV: Did you receive your orders for Vietnam then?

7 TE: I think I had them before then.

8 RV: Did you know what your assignment would be?

9 TE: I knew I was an infantry officer going to Vietnam. That's all I knew.

10 RV: So what happened after Monterey, did you get some leave time before you
11 shipped out?

12 TE: Got some leave, drove across the country in a car I borrowed from one of my
13 lieutenant friends who didn't want to drive his car. He wanted to fly. Drove down
14 through Texas and picked up my girlfriend, drove up to Pennsylvania. Took her to
15 school at Vassar and then got myself ready to go.

16 RV: How did your family feel about you getting ready to go over to the war?

17 TE: They were pretty nervous. Of course my brother was already there. He was
18 at Cam Ranh Bay in the big airbase there. Wasn't really exposed to combat but they
19 were pretty nervous.

20 RV: Did you try to do anything to reassure them or did you say, "Well, I don't
21 know what's going to happen."

22 TE: How could I reassure them? I was going to a combat zone as a Marine. I
23 was going to get shot at.

24 RV: So how did you actually get over to Vietnam? Where did you depart from?

25 TE: I went to San Francisco and—is that Travis or Norton? I can never
26 remember the Air Force Base outside San Francisco.

27 RV: Travis.

28 TE: Travis and I flew on what was probably a World Airways or something plane
29 out of there.

30 RV: A civilian flight?

31 TE: Yes, to Okinawa.

1 RV: What was the mood on the plane like? Do you remember?

2 TE: We were going to Okinawa and we were going to be there a couple days so it
3 wasn't particularly somber. It was what you might expect if you get a bunch of twenty to
4 twenty-five year old American males together on a plane. It was kind raucous actually.

5 RV: So you got to Okinawa.

6 TE: Got to Okinawa went to Camp Schwab. They had you there with a three day
7 orientation program. I remember we got an intelligence briefing from the G-3 staff there.

8 RV: What did they tell you?

9 TE: They sort of told us what the order of battle was and where the Marines were
10 stationed and what kind of enemy contacts were being made there. The thing I remember
11 best about it, because it subsequently came home to me was they sort of showed us a map
12 of the northern part of South Vietnam and where all the different Marine units were.
13 Everything made a whole lot of sense except that battalion that was out there at Khe
14 Sanh. It just looked like it was out there by itself in a position that was going to be
15 difficult to support. That became important because when I finally did sort of on very
16 short notice get scrambled to go to Khe Sanh I was pretty nervous.

17 RV: Right did you ask any questions or anybody raise that point?

18 TE: I don't recall anybody raising that point. Myself I thought it was pretty
19 damn obvious.

20 RV: That's a good observation you made. So after your intelligence briefing,
21 what happened?

22 TE: We you know got our basic gear and checked. We all brought along a lot of
23 gear. A few bags of all our uniforms and stuff. We staged those in the warehouse there.
24 We got on a plane and flew to Da Nang.

25 RV: What were your first impressions of Vietnam when you came in?

26 TE: Same as everybody else. Hot, humid, smelly. That first night they put us in
27 transient officers' quarters, which was a hardback tent with a plywood floor, which was
28 about two meters from the wire fence that ran along one of the major runways of Da
29 Nang Airfield. So I got absolutely zero sleep all night because there were jets taking off
30 and landing all night, plus I was kind of apprehensive I guess. So the next day I was told
31 I was going to the 3rd Battalion 26th Marines and that there was a truck convoy there to

1 Camp Evans. There was a truck convoy leaving and I was to get on it, so I did. I sat in
2 the back of a 6x6 truck and rode up Route 1, which was quite an experience and quite an
3 education.

4 RV: What happened?

5 TE: It was my first real look at Vietnam. We're going right up Route 1, which is
6 a major road. There's just all kinds of activity, small villages, commerce. The road itself
7 was maybe a little wider than a king sized bed. Traffic was amazing. The way to make
8 your way along if you were a truck or a bus was to lean on your horn so that all the
9 walkers and bicyclers, and motorbikers would get out of your way. It was just like a mad
10 house. I was just sort of amused and amazed by it. Then we got up there, when we got
11 past we went around Hue rather than through it. Just north of Hue there was an ARVN
12 (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) truck coming the other way. Just as it got almost
13 abreast of us it triggered a mine, which basically blew the cab over the top of our truck
14 into the rice paddy on the other side. Sort of deafened us for a while. These two guys
15 were sitting in this cab both got both their legs sheared off just above the kneecap when
16 they were blown up against the dashboard. That was sort of my introduction to violence
17 in Vietnam. It was kind of scary.

18 RV: Did you all stop and render aid?

19 TE: Yes. Then the rest of the ride I realized that I was sitting there in the bed of
20 this truck right over the top of the gas tank. Pretty nervous.

21 RV: I can imagine. How would you judge the morale of the Marines you were
22 around and in general about American troops when you first arrived?

23 TE: Let me tell you what happened when I first arrived. My truck got to Camp
24 Evans. We pulled in and they drop me off. I go over to the COC (chain of command)
25 and say, "I'm reporting into 3/26 and the major that I report to is Carl Mundy." Later
26 became a commandant of the Marine Corps. He said, "You're going to India Company."
27 I said, "Fine. Where's India Company?" He said, "Report to the first sergeant. He's
28 down in that tent down there." So I walked down to this general purpose tent. The first
29 sergeant was there and I told him who I was. I said, "Where is the company
30 commander?" He said, "The company commander is home on emergency leave." I said,
31 "Where's the XO (commanding officer)?" He said, "He got killed last week." I said,

1 “Who’s the senior officer in the company?” He said, “You are.” I said, “Where’s the
2 company?” He said, “This is it.” I looked around the tent and there were about twenty
3 guys sitting there sort of looking like they were in shell shock sort of, middle of the day
4 just staring into space. I learned that the reason I had been assigned to that battalion and
5 that company was that less than a week before they had been involved in a regimental,
6 walked into an NVA regimental ambush just west of Con Thien and really gotten
7 severely mauled. That combined with the fact that the thirteen month—that battalion had
8 come over as a unit on a ship from San Diego. It had come over in July or August of
9 1966, so everybody was due for rotation. So the ones who hadn’t been wounded or killed
10 were on their way home and there was just a handful left. So their morale and their state
11 of mind was not very good. The state of training and indeed strength of the company was
12 low. It was kind of good for me because I was the first of a hundred or more
13 replacements over the next couple of weeks. So I actually sort of was experienced as
14 anybody and didn’t run into the syndrome you run into a lot of cases where you’re an
15 officer you come in, everybody including the privates knows more about what happens in
16 Vietnam than you do. You sort of have to learn on the job. So that was actually kind of a
17 benefit for me. It also gave us the opportunity to—we had a very good bunch of officers
18 in that company. It gave us a chance to train and mold that company the way we wanted
19 it. It actually did become one of the better infantry companies in Vietnam.

20 RV: Did you have any different understanding of what the United States policy
21 was in Vietnam and Southeast Asia overall here in 1967 as compared as to when I asked
22 you about it earlier in the sixties?

23 TE: No, I don’t think so.

24 RV: Why do you think the United States was there?

25 TE: Well, the Domino Theory basically. It had been determined if we didn’t help
26 the South Vietnamese government it was going to be overrun by the Communists. So
27 that country would become communist and that would put pressure on Laos, Burma,
28 Thailand and conceivably Indonesia and Australia was the theory. I actually think that
29 there was some validity to that. I actually believe that the ten or more years that the
30 United States delayed the eventual Communist take over of South Vietnam probably did
31 give Thailand and some of the other countries in that area, Thailand in particular, a

1 chance to build their economy and strengthen themselves to the point where they could
2 resist subversion.

3 RV: Yes sir that is one of the major arguments in favor of the Domino Theory.

4 TE: Having visited that area twice in the last five years I think there's some
5 validity to it.

6 RV: Sir, why don't we take a break for a moment?

7 RV: All right sir, continuing now. So tell me what the first few days were like
8 once you got to Camp Evans after you met those initial men. You said replacements
9 were starting to come in. How much time did you spend there at the base camp?

10 TE: We ended up basically operating out of Camp Evans until early to mid
11 December. Basically Camp Evans, actually it was the 4th Marine Regiment Headquarters
12 when we were there. The regimental staff was there. Basically our battalion and usually
13 there were at least one and sometimes two companies actually in Camp Evans, just a little
14 hill, not very high above the rice paddies. It wasn't a very prominent terrain feature.
15 Other companies would be out conducting operations south of Camp Evans. The main
16 reason Camp Evans was where it was it was near what they called the Co Bi Thanh Tan
17 Valley. Camp Evans itself was just west of Route 1. East of Route 1 was the so-called
18 Street Without Joy in a large rice producing area. Our primary mission was to interdict
19 transportation of rice and other supplies from the Street Without Joy to the mountainous
20 regions to the south and west of Camp Evans, which was where the Viet Cong and the
21 NVA were. So we conducted operations along there. In fact, not long after I took over
22 my platoon I got the 2nd Platoon of India Company in 3/26 they helicoptered us out.
23 Actually took a day or two to do it because we were going to this high peak in the
24 mountains south of Camp Evans, which was called Hill 674. We maintained a little radio
25 relay station up there for the platoon. The main purpose for that was to enable units,
26 particularly reconnaissance units operating in those mountains to maintain radio contact
27 so we had a radio relay station up there. So I could stand up there with my platoon which
28 was kind of neat because this hill had precipitous drops all the way around. We had this
29 little camp up there. Basically me and my platoon were up there without anybody
30 bothering us. Had a chance to get to know each other, do a little training. We were
31 convinced that we were in hostile territory and we were alert all the time but the truth of

1 the matter was it would have taken a monumental effort to knock us off that hill, but
2 nobody ever really tried.

3 RV: How long were you there?

4 TE: I'd say I was there two or three weeks, something like that. Then I knew that
5 they were going to try to bring another unit in. Again they had weather problems where
6 they would get socked in up there for days at a time. I remember we used to string
7 ponchos and collect water up there because it rained a little bit or there'd just be
8 condensation. So finally they got a helicopter in to get us out. The helicopter took me
9 back to Camp Evans. As I stepped off the helicopter, Lieutenant Mike Thomas came
10 over and said, "I'm the new 2nd Platoon commander, you're the XO now." I was really
11 only platoon commander for about three weeks and almost all of it up on that hill.

12 RV: Wow.

13 TE: That was again reflective of this rebuilding of that company. I had been the
14 first new lieutenant in so I was the senior guy on the ground. So I became the XO. Our
15 company commander—when I first got there our company commander was Matt
16 Caulfield. We really had a hell of a battalion. Matt Caulfield went on and retired as I
17 think a major general, maybe a lieutenant general in the Marine Corps. Harry Jenkins
18 joined the battalion not long after that. He retired as a major general and he was in
19 charge of the offshore Marines in the first Persian Gulf War. I mentioned that Carl
20 Mundy was the operations officer. He went on to become commandant of the Marine
21 Corps. We had a bunch of outstanding officers. Caulfield was a senior captain, about to
22 become major, so he was a company commander. Actually it was a great story there.
23 Remember I said when I reported in and I asked where the company commander was
24 they said home on emergency leave. That was Caulfield. Caulfield had been in the
25 Marine Corps ten years, never been shot at. He worked real hard to get assigned to
26 Vietnam. He got there and he got in country on like September eighth or ninth.
27 September seventh and tenth is when 3/26 got hit real hard in the regimental ambush I
28 was talking about west of Con Thien. On the ninth the company commander of India
29 Company got killed so Caulfield catches a helicopter from Da Nang and lands into India
30 Company that night. They're in the middle of a [several] day battle. They'd just gotten
31 hit pretty bad the day before and they were going to get hit the next day pretty badly. He

1 comes in and helps the company to get out of there, get back to Camp Evans. When he
2 gets there he finds out that his daughter is sick and they're not sure if she's going to live.
3 So he hops on an airplane and goes home on emergency leave. He's been in country
4 about forty-eight hours. He's seen most of his new company get killed or wounded and
5 now he's on his way back to the Continental United States to take care of his sick
6 daughter. That was kind of a tough introduction to combat for him. He came back and
7 he was our company commander. He was a real gung ho guy. I liked him a lot and he
8 took an immediate liking to me. He'd gotten a promotion to major so he was fairly
9 quickly promoted up to be the operations officer or the S-3 of the battalion. We got Bill
10 Dabney another senior captain who was sort of a well-known guy in the Marine Corps
11 because first of all he's married to Chesty Puller's daughter. Secondly he had been a
12 mustang; he'd been an enlisted man. He was a big guy, outspoken guy and pretty well
13 known in the Marine Corps. So he was company commander and I was his executive
14 officer. That's what I did for the next two months basically, two and a half months.

15 RV: Did that leadership position suit you? I'm assuming it did because of what
16 we've learned about you since, what you went through at OCS, kind of this coming
17 naturally to you. How did it feel in the war zone actually leading?

18 TE: It felt great. I was just delighted to find out when I told the enlisted Marines
19 to do something they did it. I think every young lieutenant sort of says, "Well gee, what
20 happens if they don't take me seriously?" So I was really delighted that it all worked the
21 way it was supposed to. I enjoyed that part of it a lot. I didn't particularly enjoy being
22 Dabney's executive officer. Dabney was sort of bigger than life and took up all the
23 oxygen. I was just sort of his administrative assistant and I didn't feel like I was being
24 utilized enough. So I was kind of glad actually. We're in an operation in late November
25 I think it was. We were out over night in the Co Bi Thanh Tan Valley setting ambushes.
26 We got a radio call that said that there'd be a helicopter coming in first thing in the
27 morning and they wanted me on it. So I was actually kind of delighted to get out of there
28 because it had been raining and wet and half the company had feet problems and
29 everything else. It was kind of miserable out there. So I get back to Camp Evans and
30 they tell me that I'm going to Mike Company. The reason is that Mike Company had
31 several incidents of Mike Company Marines shooting other Mike Company Marines.

1 RV: Really? Enlisted doing this or was this a fragging?

2 TE: It wasn't intentional. It was accidental. Like a listening post being out there
3 and an ambush coming in without proper coordination and they didn't know who it was
4 so they shot them. They had an L shaped ambush in which the guy on one extreme of
5 one arm of the L sat up in the middle of the night and somebody heard something and
6 saw something moving a couple yards away so he shot at it. It turned out it was the
7 Marine at the other end of the L. So they decided to clean house so they relieved the
8 company commander and the XO and sent two new guys in. I found out later Caulfield
9 who was the operations officer had tried to convince the battalion commander that he
10 should make me the company commander but I was just too junior at that point. There
11 were too many other guys around. They ended up putting a guy named John Gilece, who
12 was a captain who actually was a lawyer and joined the Marine Corps to be a lawyer.
13 But when he went through basic school he liked it so much he decided he wanted to try
14 being a grunt, but he had zero experience. So they put me and him together with the
15 understanding that he was the boss, but that he was to rely on me. So whereas the XO
16 often times didn't go to the field with the company I did. I became the executive officer
17 of Mike Company, but that was a much more enjoyable position because I was really
18 depended upon a lot more, relied on a lot more and had a lot more authority.

19 RV: This was about two months into your tour in November?

20 TE: Yes, that was in November sometime. I would have only been there about
21 two months at that point. That's right.

22 RV: Tell me in those intervening two months in September and October and
23 before you were transferred to Mike Company, what was your daily routine? What
24 would you all do beginning there at Camp Evans? Can you describe what the camp was
25 like?

26 TE: The camp was a sprawling camp on a sort of low hill. There was scattered
27 trees around some parts of it. Mostly we overlooked rice paddies or to the west sort of
28 just scrubland. It wasn't really used for anything. We were about ten kilometers or so
29 from the South China Sea, just west of Route 1. There were big steep mountains to the
30 south of us and to the west of us. The camp had a bunch of hardback tents, like plywood
31 floors and sides with a general purpose tent thrown over it. If you were at the camp, you

1 were responsible for security. During the day the troops wouldn't do a whole lot, clean
2 up the area, clean their weapons. Then at night they would have night defensive
3 positions around the perimeter. During the day there were a few of those manned but not
4 very many of them. That was just the day-to-day drill if you were at the camp and you
5 had the responsibility for camp security, otherwise you'd be out running patrols. Well
6 actually usually one company was assigned the manning of Hill 674 and Hill 51, which
7 was a much smaller hill down in the Co Bi Thanh Tan Valley. So that company
8 primarily had the duty to man those outposts. Then there'd be two other companies
9 operating out doing patrols or sweeps or something like that. So it depended. If you
10 were one of the operational companies, you'd leave the camp. You'd go out for maybe a
11 week at a time just sweeping through the terrain just looking for signs of the enemy,
12 mainly providing a presence that would inhibit them or make it difficult for them to carry
13 grain, most of which they did at night. So at night we would all be in ambush positions,
14 scattered ambush positions all around the area.

15 RV: Right. What were your quarters like specifically?

16 TE: Well I was assigned to like a lieutenants' BOQ, which was one of those
17 hardback tents. That's where your gear was. It was pretty rudimentary. You had a cot
18 there though. You could roll the flaps up the side of the thing. It was screened so you
19 could do that. I think we actually had a light bulb in there. You would eat hot chow if
20 you were at Camp Evans. If you were out in operations you'd eat C-rations of course. It
21 was pretty rudimentary but compared to what I had the rest of my tour it was like the lap
22 of luxury. You could take a shower, that kind of stuff.

23 RV: At night would you have to pull perimeter duty with your company?

24 TE: Sure.

25 RV: What would you do?

26 TE: Actually what you do is you get up and you walk the lines for a while. You
27 come back and catch a half hour of sleep or something. Then you go out and do it again.

28 RV: How many Marines were based at Camp Evans while you were there?

29 TE: I guess our whole battalion plus the regimental headquarters. That would
30 probably have added up to somewhere around fifteen hundred men I would guess.

31 RV: Okay, how often was Camp Evans shelled?

1 TE: Very rarely. There was really very little going on there. We would
2 occasionally get minor contact in the ambushes and stuff. Actually the only time I
3 remember Camp Evans receiving incoming it was friendly. My buddy Rich Foley had
4 the 3rd Platoon down on Hill 51. Hill 51 overlooked a little shallow stream bed which we
5 assumed was one of the routes the enemy would use to pack their rice through there at
6 night. He had a 106 recoilless rifle at Hill 51, decided he was going to zero it in so that
7 he could shoot it right down into that stream at night for H&I (harassment & interdiction)
8 fire. So he fired a round and it hit the streambed, which was rock and skipped. Skipped
9 right up into the middle of Camp Evans at thirteen hundred in the afternoon and it went
10 off. Everybody thought we were having incoming. Took them a while to sort it out and
11 figure out what happened. It turned out that our battalion commander, for some reason I
12 don't know why, I found this out later from Carl Mundy, commandant. Our battalion
13 commander didn't have very good relations with Colonel Dick who was the 4th
14 Regimental commander. So whenever the 4th Regiment wanted somebody from 3/26,
15 Major Mundy would go over there. So Major Mundy went over there, he was called over
16 there because he found out this round was a friendly from one of our troops. Colonel
17 Dick was infuriated. He told Mundy he was relieved. He wanted him out of there the
18 next day. So next morning Mundy's packing his bag and getting ready to go and the
19 regimental executive officer sees him and says, "What are you doing?" He said,
20 "Colonel told me I was relieved. I'm leaving." "Oh, I'm sure he's [calmed down] this
21 morning. He'll get over it." I heard that story from Mundy when we went back to Camp
22 Evans in 1998. "I went from being relieved, almost ended my career right there. I went
23 on to become the commandant." That was the only incoming round I can remember.

24 RV: How did you first experience combat?

25 TE: Depends on what you mean by combat.

26 RV: Your first contact with the enemy let's say.

27 TE: My first contact with the enemy, this is a funny story. I had only been there
28 a couple days. India Company still wasn't built up, this was at Camp Evans. One night
29 just as it was getting dark, somebody comes and gets me and said they want me up at the
30 COC. I walk up there and they tell me that we've been having problems with the enemy
31 mining Route 1 at night. They decided that they wanted to send an ambush out there. So

1 they got together about thirty guys, cooks, bottle washers, just whoever they could find.
2 They gave me a sergeant that I didn't know and I had never met. I hadn't met any of
3 these troops. They said, "Okay we want you to go out through the wire, cross the rice
4 paddies go over to Route 1 and put in a night ambush." I thought, "Oh boy this is not the
5 way we were taught to do it at basic school." It was dark as could be so I didn't even
6 know the terrain. I hadn't even been outside the wire yet. So they told me what direction
7 to go. So I told the sergeant I wanted him at the rear of the column and I was going to be
8 up at the front. We were going to have to work really hard not to lose contact because it
9 was so dark. So we wandered down single file into this rice paddy and headed toward
10 Route 1. Route 1 wasn't that far away so I got there pretty quickly. Route 1 at that point
11 had a berm that was sort of like a forty-five degree angle and we just sort of lay on that.
12 So I started laying guys in along there. I get a radio call from the sergeant he said, "I
13 think we've got a separation in the column." I said, "What makes you think so?" He
14 said, "I've got four guys here, but we can't find the rest of you." I said, "Okay just stop
15 where you are." So I crawl along the berm counting Marines, discovered that I had
16 twenty-six Marines. I knew I was missing four, he had the four. So while I was doing
17 that I'm down at the right end of the column and somebody whispers to me there's some
18 movement on Route 1. There's four people walking down Route 1. So I told everybody,
19 "Nobody shoots until I do," because I was afraid it might be my four Marines. So I'm
20 waiting and as you're lying down on the edge of the road, you're looking up toward the
21 sky. There was just enough contrast that I could make out these four people as they came
22 abreast of me. They were wearing conical rice hats. I figured if my four Marines are
23 dumb enough to walk down Route 1 with conical rice hats they deserve to be shot. So I
24 fired a round from my .45. Actually I challenged them first because I wanted to be sure.
25 I said, "Halt! Who goes there?"

26 RV: Did you come out and stand up in front of them?

27 TE: No, just yelled at them.

28 RV: You said, "Halt! Who goes there?"

29 TE: Didn't get any response so I fired my .45 at them. Well now the whole
30 twenty-six guys all open up. All on full automatic. I mean it takes me a minute and half
31 to stop them. We must have shot thousands of rounds. So I jump up onto the road,

1 nobody's there. There's three or four rice hats all shot to hell and a little bit of blood, but
2 not much. As soon as they heard me, or we opened up they dove off the other side of the
3 road. That was the last we saw of them. So then I started getting a call from the battalion.
4 They wanted to know what the hell was going on. I tried to explain to them. They said,
5 "Do you have all your Marines?" I said, "No, I'm missing four Marines." They said,
6 "Well we've got them back here." The sergeant had heard the shooting and turned
7 around and gone back into camp. They said, "Go ahead and stay out there for the rest of
8 the night." So we spent the rest of the night out there on ambush. All I could think about
9 was when I got back to the bunker they're going to relieve me and send me home or
10 make me a cook or something.

11 RV: Why because you lost the four Marines?

12 TE: Yeah, we lost four Marines and then we opened up on four Viet Cong and
13 didn't get any of them. Couldn't screw it up much worse than we did. That was my first
14 exposure. Not too glorious.

15 RV: When was that? How far into your tour?

16 TE: I'd only been at Camp Evans for two days or something like that. It was
17 right away.

18 RV: Let me ask this general question. Did you prefer operating at night or during
19 the day? I guess that would depend obviously on terrain and your mission and a lot of
20 different factors. But in general?

21 TE: In general during the day. In general in Vietnam we commanded the day and
22 they commanded the night. That's basically the way it was.

23 RV: What are the differences between the two?

24 TE: Well it was hard enough in Vietnam. If you were on unfamiliar territory it
25 was hard enough to figure out where you were during the day. At night it was more
26 difficult. Of course it was cooler at night. Those were the major differences I think. I
27 had more confidence for example that if I got into a situation that required support that I
28 could call in artillery and air accurately during the day. Although, if we were operating
29 under triple canopy jungle, which I did a fair amount of it didn't really matter because
30 you couldn't see anything anyway. I mean you could see the vegetation around you but

1 you couldn't see any landmarks or anything to help determine your position. So it didn't
2 really matter much under the canopy whether you got the air at night.

3 RV: Did you find that you had enough supplies at the base camp and while you
4 were in the field?

5 TE: Yes. I mean there's a qualification to that. That is I spent the Tet Offensive
6 in 1968, Siege of Khe Sanh on Hill 81 South, which was the western most outpost. It had
7 to be supplied solely by helicopter. There were only like three places on the hill where
8 you could land a helicopter. The NVA had all three of them zeroed in with 120mm
9 mortars. So we had a shortage of everything. Not quite critical but certainly worrisome
10 during the first month or so during the Tet Offensive, water, ammunition, food, mail,
11 everything. Other than that yeah.

12 RV: When you were operating out of Camp Evans as India Company XO and
13 Mike Company what did you actually take with you into the field? What was your
14 uniform consisting of?

15 TE: It was jungle utilities, the green ones before they had camouflage ones. A
16 pack with as many C-rations as you needed, counting two a day. If you're going out for
17 four days, you take eight of them, an extra pair of socks. Other than that it was all
18 ordnance or weapons. Originally when I was operating in that area, in addition to my
19 pistol I carried an M-14 just because I like the M-14, I liked it a lot. I carried that for the
20 first couple months but I realized when I was trying to use radios and so forth it just got
21 in the way. I never fired the thing anyway. I realized that if we ever got to the point
22 where I had to fire a rifle there'd be rifles lying around for me to use so I stopped
23 carrying a rifle. But that's what I carried originally. You would carry as much
24 ammunition as you could basically. Thirty magazines worth, a couple hand grenades.
25 Most of the troops, in addition to their own personal ammunition would carry at least a
26 box of ammunition for the machine gun or a couple of rounds for the 60 mm mortars.
27 We were pretty heavily laden.

28 RV: Was there any weapon that you did not have that you wished you did have
29 there?

30 TE: You know, in Vietnam we stopped carrying the 3.5 inch rocket launcher, the
31 so-called bazooka, which is basically an anti-tank weapon because we got substituted for

1 that these collapsible LAAWs, light anti-tank weapons that were shorter and a lot lighter
2 and had a round already in what was basically a cardboard tube. You'd open it up and
3 fire it, then you'd throw it away. We always carried some LAAWs (light anti-tank
4 weapons). We always carried some LAAWs, but you were a lot less likely to use that
5 weapon because once you used it you didn't have it anymore, than you would a 3.5 inch
6 rocket launcher. I often wished that we had the old 3.5 or something like it to use more
7 often. The enemy's most effective weapon was their rocket-propelled grenades. The
8 LAAW was our only rejoinder to that. I didn't think it was anywhere near as effective as
9 the RPGs (rocket-propelled grenade). I would have like to have the old bazooka and
10 plenty of shells. Of course that was just extra weight.

11 RV: How did your equipment function?

12 TE: By in large it functioned very well. I was there when the M-16 started getting
13 commonly used as I'm sure you know—you there?

14 RV: Yes, sir.

15 TE: I'm sure you know there were some problems with it when it first showed
16 up. It was a great weapon but the tolerances in the chamber were a lot smaller than they
17 were in the M-14. A little bit of dirt in there would cause it to jam. Then they discovered
18 pretty quickly that the spring that controlled the rate of fire, that recoil was a little too
19 active and made the weapon fire a little faster than it really could without jamming. They
20 corrected that. So the first couple months the M-16 was a questionable weapon. After
21 they made those corrections it turned out to be an outstanding weapon, especially if you
22 were operating in heavily vegetated areas and you had a chance of getting into an
23 ambush. The key was to put out enough fire to gain fire superiority over the enemy. This
24 was not aimed firing because half the time you couldn't see who you were shooting at.
25 You just wanted to put out a high volume of fire. The M-16 was great for that because
26 for one thing you could carry a lot more ammunition because the ammunition was much
27 lighter. Occasionally you'd have a grenade or something that would do it. By in large,
28 everything worked fine.

29 RV: Can you describe in general what life in the field was like when you were
30 away from Camp Evans? I guess not at Khe Sanh, we'll talk about that separately. But
31 just in general running your operations out of Camp Evans.

1 TE: Running out of Camp Evans, basically you'd run patrols in rice paddy areas
2 or in the area west of us, which is just sort of scrub land. It was kind of different in the
3 sense that there wasn't much stealth. I mean if you were moving around in those areas,
4 you could be seen from quite a distance away. So mainly we would move from one area
5 to the other, sweep through areas, looking for signs that the enemy had been there
6 recently. Then as we got to late afternoon we'd set in a camp, which is basically just
7 stopping and digging a few holes and maybe having some fires to cook dinner and so
8 forth. Then as soon as dark fell we would send out ambushes into positions all around us.
9 That's what we would do. Then at dawn, we would pack up and do it all over again.

10 RV: Two things I want to ask you. For people listening to this in the future,
11 when you say sweep through an area, how would you actually do that?

12 TE: Basically we would do it, depends. If we had an objective to move from
13 point A to point B we would generally do it in column meaning one after the other, one
14 platoon following the other. Have flank security out, which might be depending on the
15 kind of terrain a fire team or a squad that was fifty or a hundred meters to our left and the
16 same to our right so that we had a broader front in case we ran into a meeting engagement
17 with the enemy. If we were actually doing a sweep of an area we would get in lines so
18 that we were abreast of each other and sweep through a certain area covering maybe a
19 thousand meters at a time moving forward a couple hundred meters and then regrouping,
20 just to make sure we didn't miss anything in that area. You know in that area there we
21 weren't going to stumble upon a large concentration of enemy because we would have
22 been able to see them before we got to them. But we were looking for tunnels and paths
23 and gear or trash that might have been left behind or signs of recent fires and that sort of
24 thing. Looked for places that the enemy might be utilizing.

25 RV: Can you describe how you would set up an ambush?

26 TE: Basically what we would do is if we were out on operations and we put in a
27 night camp like I was talking about, sometimes we would wait until after dark.
28 Sometimes before dark we would send a unit out and put it into position, but then after
29 dark it would change its position. We would have chosen certain spots, indicated on the
30 map and by terrain features where they were. Ambush was usually a squad size. We
31 would brief a squad leader who should have been a sergeant but was more often a

1 corporal. He would take his unit out under cover of darkness and reach his objective and
2 place his position. Usually it was online so the guys were all facing in one direction,
3 there was one to their left and one to their right. Sometimes depending on the terrain
4 feature you might put them in an L shape or some other configuration. Basically they
5 would put one guy in a regular ambush. You might be two or three meters from the guy
6 to your left and right. But you'd put one guy at each end further out, maybe ten or twenty
7 meters to act as sort of early warning if somebody was moving along the trail or
8 something. You'd get in position and just stay in position. It was night ambush usually
9 you'd have 50 percent alert so pair guys up; one would sleep while the other watched.
10 Then they'd rotate that throughout the night.

11 RV: Did you find these tactics effective?

12 TE: Not particularly. Like I said we didn't really have much contact with them
13 in the Camp Evans area. I think probably we were fulfilling a function by acting as pre-
14 empting the enemy from making a concern and making it more difficult to them to move
15 large quantities of supplies through that area. Number of contacts was minimal and they
16 were usually pretty small.

17 RV: What would you have done differently if you could?

18 TE: To do the mission we were assigned to do in that area, I can't think of
19 anything that would have worked any better than what we were doing.

20 RV: How would you rate the quality of intelligence that you received during your
21 time there at Evans?

22 TE: Okay, but not great. I mean we got very little specific intelligence like
23 there's unit moving through there tonight or this unit is over there. Sort of general
24 intelligence about what was going on in the general area. It really wasn't all that useful.

25 RV: How about later in your tour, did the intelligence kind of remain that way or
26 did it get any better?

27 TE: It depends what level you're at. As it turns out the intelligence regarding
28 what the enemy was doing with respect to Khe Sanh was quite good, but didn't get
29 passed down to us. We just got told what to do and where to go. We were sort of
30 speculating and guessing as to what was going on and why we were doing it. At our

1 level, I would have to say the intelligence was not that great and there wasn't that much
2 of it. But obviously at division level and higher their intelligence was pretty good.

3 RV: How about the quality of communication between American units?

4 TE: It was great. It was about that time really I think that the PRC-25, the PRC-
5 25 radios became available for use down at a squad level. It was an outstanding radio. It
6 was fairly heavy and you had to carry several batteries for it and they add a lot of weight.
7 In terms of its reliability and its range it was outstanding and a dramatic improvement
8 over the previous handheld radios that had been used at squad level. When I was platoon
9 commander I had a radio operator with me and his radio was on the company network all
10 the time. When I was a company commander I would have two radio operators, at least
11 one on the company net that communicated with my platoons and one on the [battalionet]
12 so I could talk to the battalion staff and commander. Then there were always usually
13 with us if we were moving around anywhere at least one radio that was dedicated to
14 supporting arms like air or artillery. Usually at least two, one for air and one for artillery.
15 Occasionally even a naval gunfire radio. So we had lots of communications and they
16 were very effective and very good. They could be a little frustrating sometimes because
17 you were always restricted to certain networks. For example, toward the end of my tour I
18 was patrolling on one of these mountains west of Da Nang and apparently it was one that
19 friendlies had hardly ever or maybe never been on. What I didn't know was that the
20 Navy had gotten used to using it for target practice. Well nobody told the Navy we were
21 up there. So we were up there one day and I see this white phosphorous round hit about a
22 hundred meters down the hill. The enemy rarely spotted with white phosphorous rounds
23 so I figured it was a friendly round. I get on the radio and called battalion, battalion had
24 to call regiment, regiment has to call division. While all these calls are going on, they're
25 trying to figure out what's going on. This ship, after it fires two or three white
26 phosphorous rounds, fires for effect at our mountain. We were all diving into trenches.
27 Fortunately naval gunfire has flat trajectory. To try to hit the exact top of the mountain is
28 very difficult if you were a little short down the mountain. If you're a little high it goes
29 over the top and behind you somewhere. So the rounds didn't really land close to us, but
30 it sure scared the hell out of us. Anyway it illustrated the fact that there was no way I

1 could instantly communicate with high enough command to forestall that fire for effect
2 before it happened. That was very frustrating.

3 RV: I can imagine so. Did you ever work with canine units?

4 TE: Yes.

5 RV: Can you describe that?

6 TE: Yes. After we got out of Khe Sanh, after a few more weeks in 3rd Division
7 area, we got sent to the 1st Division. We went down there and their first assignment to us
8 was to go out into the mountains west of Da Nang where basically no friendlies had been
9 and try to find and interdict the enemy who was whenever they felt like it, lobbing
10 rockets into the Da Nang Airbase. It was actually kind of interesting. I did this as the
11 company commander of India Company. I had been relieved as the company commander
12 of Mike Company when Harry Jenkins, the senior captain, came in at the end of the
13 siege. Now I was his assistant operations officer under Major Caulfield. One night about
14 twenty-one hundred, Colonel Studt, the battalion commander, and Caulfield called me to
15 come see them and I do. They say, "We're giving you India Company." I couldn't
16 figure that out because Dabney who had India Company had left about the same time I
17 left Mike Company. But a new captain had taken over, another guy that'd been a Marine
18 for about ten years. Well it turns out he'd gone out and patrolled with India Company.
19 This guy was one of the most highly regarded captains in the Marine Corps. He was
20 assumed to be one of the smartest officers they had. After he'd gone out on patrol, he
21 decided that he was in the wrong line of work. I often used to speculate. I had a lot of
22 Marine officers that had been Marines for ten years or nine years or eight years and had
23 never had a bullet fired in anger and they didn't know whether they were in the right
24 business or not. Well this guy decided that he wasn't. So he went and told the colonel
25 that he didn't think he was cut out to be an infantry company commander so they gave
26 me the company. There was a lot of derisive talk and laughter about this guy. It certainly
27 didn't do his career any good. I always thought that took a great amount of courage to go
28 to a battalion commander or colonel and say, "Thanks for the company but I'm not the
29 right guy," before you got yourself and a bunch of other people in trouble. So anyway at
30 twenty-one hundred they give me the company and they say, "Oh by the way, you're
31 going out for a three-week operation at five in the morning." I said, "Thanks a lot." So

1 our assignment was to march up into these mountains and go to a certain peak and when
2 we got there they would lower in chainsaws by helicopter on cables. Then we were to cut
3 down the trees on the top of the mountain and make room for a landing zone. Then they
4 would bring in the battalion. As they landed we would strike out for the west and go to
5 the next one and just keep going further west and further in to the mountains and into the
6 jungle. So we did that. After we'd been out there for a while anytime you were moving
7 in that area, you were faced with a dilemma. There were small trails that criss-crossed
8 through there you could find. If you got one and you moved on it, you could make you
9 some time. If you moved on it, you were subject to being ambushed. If you didn't move
10 on the trail then you had to cut your way through the jungle and it took you forever to get
11 anywhere. You'd spent all day and not make eight hundred meters. So we sort of did a
12 little bit of both and it kind of frustrated me. Then they called and offered me dogs.
13 Well, my first reaction was just, "Just what I need, a dog out in the jungle" I figured,
14 "Why not?" It was the first time that I had used them and one of the first times that a
15 Marine unit had used them. They were German shepherds and they had two kinds of
16 dogs. You could get an ambush dog, a dog that smelled people or you could get a booby
17 trap dog that smelled booby traps. Clearly an ambush dog was what we needed. So we
18 get this dog and handler, he came in. Every time we moved we moved to a trail. Dog
19 handler and the dog would walk point. It was great. We moved fairly quickly, we didn't
20 worry about ambushes. If there were enemy in the area, the dog would alert us. We'd
21 deploy tactically.

22 RV: How would the dog alert you?

23 TE: He would like go into a point and basically was a communication between
24 him and the handler. The handler would understand that the dog was telling him some
25 thing was up and he would let us know. It worked great. I was delighted to have found
26 this solution to what was otherwise an insoluble problem. We worked with several
27 different dogs. We worked with them regularly. We wouldn't go anywhere without
28 them. I actually have a good story there too because at one point remember I told you the
29 dogs could smell an ambush and not a booby trap. So this dog didn't smell a booby trap
30 and his handler set it off. The dog wasn't injured but the handler was badly injured.
31 Here we are we're in triple canopy jungle and the trees are like 150 feet high. There's no

1 landing zone anywhere close by. This guy is in really bad shape. He's got a serious gut
2 wound and he's losing a lot of blood. The corpsman tells me if this guy's going to live,
3 we've got to get him out of there. I called and told them what was going on and they
4 offered to try a cable extraction. I said, "Okay." So this big CH-53 helicopter comes in
5 and finds us and hovers overhead and lowers a winch cable down to us. On the end of
6 the cable there's what they call a jungle penetrator. It sort of looks like an anchor, the
7 flukes can fold up. So we fold down the flukes, we sit this guy on the flukes and have
8 him hugging the cable and strap him to the cable. When he's ready to go we give them
9 the signal. Meanwhile there was a little breeze up there so the helicopter started drifting
10 a little bit. So this cable starts getting pulled up it starts swinging. Well this guy starts
11 bouncing off teak trees. This guys is bleeding, he's throwing up. He's defecating, he's
12 crying and I'm bouncing him off teak trees. I just thought, "Oh God, I'm killing this
13 guy." I really felt bad. They finally got him up took him off. Now what do I do about
14 the dog? Can't keep the dog without the handler so they send the fluke back down, the
15 penetrator back down for the dog. That was just as funny as the other things was sad
16 because that dog was not really very happy when we grabbed him and strapped him to
17 that penetrator and started moving up. He's howling and barking and we're all laughing.
18 It turned out well. They both made it fine. We got a new dog and a new handler sent in
19 as soon as we could get one.

20 RV: Were these German shepherds?

21 TE: Yeah. We didn't mess with the dog. The handler handled the dog. We just
22 worked with handler. They were a great find and a very effective tool

23 RV: Did you ever employ snipers in your company?

24 TE: We had a couple guys in the company that were sort of self appointed snipers
25 but not really trained snipers. I did work with snipers occasionally. I even had the
26 opportunity at Khe Sanh before the activity started there was down at the end of the
27 runway which they used as a range with a couple of trained snipers. I had the opportunity
28 to fire their weapons, which were special sniper weapons. They were outstanding. It was
29 unbelievable how good they were and how effective you could be with them. We had
30 snipers attached to us periodically. I don't recall any particular dramatic situations in
31 which their services were that much better. One of the reasons I carried the M-14 for a

1 while was after everybody else had the M-16 was the M-14 had a longer range and that
2 kind of thing. I always sort of fancied myself a sniper but I never really did any.

3 RV: Right, because you had qualified expert.

4 TE: I was a pretty good shot.

5 RV: Tom, what are your general impressions of the enemy that you faced the VC
6 and the NVA?

7 TE: Generally I think they were extraordinarily brave, very well trained, and
8 remarkably disciplined. As nearly as I could tell they had amazing morale considering
9 the circumstances under which they operated.

10 RV: This is about the VC and the NVA?

11 TE: I'm talking particularly about the NVA. I had a lot more experience with
12 them than I did the VC. But the VC were formidable enemies as well. The main thing
13 about the VC was you couldn't pin them down. You couldn't find them. That was
14 mostly a booby trap kind of war, which is just more frustrating than can possibly be
15 imagined. I mean if you're moving through an area and you trip a booby trap, now
16 you've got a guy that's seriously injured and there's nobody to fight back against. And if
17 you're in an area where that happens regularly it's very demoralizing and very
18 frustrating. The enemy was very good, the Viet Cong, locating those things and
19 disguising them and just making life miserable for you.

20 RV: What would you say were the strengths of the NVA? You said they were
21 well organized, disciplined, motivated?

22 TE: They were very effective fighters. You hear that their frontal attacks they
23 would dope themselves up first. I don't know whether that's true or not. It might explain
24 what otherwise would seem to be foolhardy bravery on their part. I've read a lot and you
25 can use your imagination about what living conditions were like for them. The fact that
26 they were as dedicated as they were to their cause was really very impressive I thought.
27 The quality of their weapons was outstanding. The way they used them was outstanding.
28 They were very effective with the RPG and the AK-47. The 120mm mortar, which we
29 were subjected to at 881, was an awesome weapon. That was devastating. I was very
30 impressed with them. It would have been easy and probably originally the Marines are
31 pretty cocky. "We're Americans; we've got the best equipment and everything. We're

1 just going to go over there and kick ass of these little guys from some third world
2 country.” By the time I’d had an opportunity to fight with them for a while I was very
3 impressed and never underestimated them.

4 RV: What would you say their weaknesses were?

5 TE: There were two major weaknesses. One is we had in most circumstances
6 superior supporting arms, the main difference being air power. We commanded the air. I
7 don’t even want to think what it would have been like if the air superiority had been
8 contested, if they had been our equal in the air. I suspect that America would have not
9 stayed as long as it did because it would have been pretty devastating stuff I think. Most
10 of the time especially when we were in movement out in the jungle and so forth, we had
11 access to I think better artillery than they did. The exception of that was when we were at
12 Khe Sanh. Khe Sanh was close enough to the Laotian border that the enemy had long-
13 range artillery in Laos that could reach Khe Sanh and none of our artillery could reach it.
14 They outranged us in that regard so they definitely had the edge in artillery there. But we
15 had the exclusive command of the skies. There were jets up there dropping stuff every
16 minute of every day for three months. It was quite awesome actually to see the amount
17 of ordnance that was dropped. Somebody told me there was more ordnance dropped in
18 the Khe Sanh area during the Tet Offensive than was dropped by the Allies in Italy in
19 World War II. I believe it. We had one guy up in the hill. He was Arrotta, I just saw
20 him at a reunion not long ago. He was a corporal and we called him the world’s
21 mightiest corporal. His job was to coordinate the air attacks. So every day from dawn to
22 dusk he was on his radio communicating with the spotter planes or one of the pilots
23 themselves on one of the jets. It got to be known by all the air people that he would
24 always have a target for them. For example if they were assigned some place else and for
25 some reason, weather or something, couldn’t do it there, they had to drop their ordnance
26 before they could land they would just stop by Khe Sanh and Arrotta would have a target
27 for them. Sometimes he’d have four and five and six flights stacked up waiting for the
28 next target. He just dropped ordnance all day. Blew away the jungle.

29 RV: Can you describe NVA tactics?

30 TE: Well, I mean the ambush was their most devastating tactic. I mean they
31 learned early on that if they could wound an American we were going to do whatever we

1 had to to get that guy out of there. So if they could just create an ambush and get you
2 into the ambush and knock down one guy than you were in effect going to feed yourself
3 into their ambush. They were very effective at sighting ambushes and at disguising them
4 and at triggering them. So that was by far their most devastating weapon, even if it was
5 not quite as injurious to our morale, not nearly as injurious to our morale as the booby
6 traps. Fortunately the first half of the war when I was up at the 3rd Marine Division up
7 near the DMZ booby traps were an exception because there weren't many indigenous
8 personnel around. The second half when we were down around Da Nang the booby traps
9 were a constant problem except for those times we were out in the mountains and jungles
10 and we were more worried about ambushes. I would say the ambushes are their most
11 effective tactic.

12 RV: Tom why don't we go ahead and stop for today? We're out of time.

13 TE: Okay.

Session 2: August 26, 2003

1 Richard Verrone: This is Richard Verrone and I'm continuing my interview with
2 Mr. Tom Esslinger. Today is August 26, 2003. It's a little after 8:30 AM Central
3 Standard Time. I am in Lubbock, Texas on the campus of Texas Tech University in the
4 Special Collections Library interview room. Mr. Esslinger, you are in Lake Manassas,
5 Virginia. Why don't we pick up sir where we left off? We had discussed in detail some
6 of your operations and things about your experiences with India and Mike Company
7 working out of Camp Evans. I wanted to know, you described your first incident with
8 combat. Could you describe some of the missions, memorable incidents, anything that
9 comes to mind when you think about that time between September and December of
10 1967?

11 Tom Esslinger: Yes, I described the general day-to-day missions and they were
12 fairly routine. I think I mentioned the fairly lengthy patrol and so forth through the Co Bi
13 Thanh Tan Valley in November when it was raining. That was kind of memorable.
14 There was one other one. The troops over there occasionally engaged in what they called
15 County Fair. This involved a village near Route 1, south of Camp Evans. I think it might
16 have been called My Chanh, M-y C-h-a-n-h. What that involved was starting out as a
17 combat mission. What we would do is we actually ran a fairly sizeable patrol through
18 that area just to sort of get a good close look at it. A couple days later under cover of
19 darkness we slipped back in. I think two companies were involved and put a cordon
20 around the village at night and then in the morning went into the village and checked out
21 everybody. Tried to figure out whether there were any signs of Viet Cong sympathizers
22 or actual Viet Cong soldiers. We found a fair amount of, a normal amount of supplies
23 and a few military weapons and so forth. We captured a few young Vietnamese that
24 were suspects. Then as soon as that was done we brought in the doctors and so forth and
25 turned it into an event for the people. There was some music. The thing was supposed to
26 go on for a couple of days. I think it did go on for about a day and a half before we were
27 called out to go prepare for a bigger operation. Now the doctors and the corpsman
28 provided medical care to the citizens of the village. It was kind of funny. I was looking
29 at a letter I wrote after that the other night. It reminded me, I told about this operation in

1 the letter and just sort of as a throw away line I said one child did die from a reaction to a
2 penicillin shot. Otherwise it was a great thing. It sort of reminded me of even that early
3 in my tour sort of the hardening of our attitude toward the Vietnamese. I've often
4 reflected on how we took a group of pretty normal, pretty well balanced Americans over
5 there and within a fairly short period of time we had all developed this very hardened
6 attitude toward the Vietnamese, particularly the enemy but even the people that were
7 supposedly on our side, although we didn't have that much contact with them. When we
8 did I think we treated them with courtesy. In our hearts and our minds I don't think we
9 thought of them as equal human beings. They were small, they were a different color,
10 they spoke a different language, they had different culture, they had different customs.
11 Plus we were in a position where if we came across any of their countrymen who we
12 regarded as enemy we were prepared to kill them. As we went further along and
13 particularly as you started getting into situations where we were exposed to booby traps,
14 which really as I indicted before was very frustrating and there was nobody to strike back
15 at. You sort of suspected any Vietnamese you saw might have been the one that set the
16 booby trap. It really did just harden our attitude toward them. I remember one time we
17 were going through a jungle area after it had been hit by a Napalm strike a couple days
18 earlier. We found a couple of dead NVA, who by that time had bloated and had been
19 burned. We were all laughing and everybody was coming and taking a look at what we
20 called crispy critters because the outside of their body was all burned and sort of black.
21 That attitude at the time seemed perfectly normal and didn't really bother me. But
22 reflecting back on it, I don't have any particular pronouncement to say about it except I
23 think it was fairly remarkable, the extent to which you could dehumanize the enemy.
24 Maybe it was necessary. Maybe that was necessary in order for us to injure him or kill
25 them without conscience. It was an interesting and kind of amazing phenomenon.

26 RV: Do you think that was necessary even also with the civilian population that
27 you had to always be on your guard, always had to be looking out, that you could only
28 reach a certain level of comfort with these people?

29 TE: Absolutely. In fact, one of the reasons I went back when I went back in
30 1998, was that when I left Vietnam I had practically zero regard for the Vietnamese, for
31 all Vietnamese. Living around Washington over the years I was exposed to a fair number

1 of them who had settled in this area after they left Vietnam, Vietnamese restaurants and
2 so forth. I actually sort of got to like them as individuals. I sort of felt like maybe if I
3 went back to the country my attitude toward the Vietnamese in general would soften. In
4 fact it did happen to a much greater extent than I imagined actually.

5 RV: Can you explain that process? How did that happen? This is something we
6 can talk about later in the interview when you do go back and talk about what happened.
7 How did you make the transition internally? What shifted?

8 TE: You mean when I went back?

9 RV: When your attitude toward the Vietnamese civilians changed.

10 TE: I remember we had a Vietnamese restaurant that opened probably in the
11 eighties sometime I would guess, near where I lived. We went there several times. The
12 woman that ran the place was very voluble and she would go up and chat and talk and
13 greet us as old friends. Over a period of time we learned a little bit more about her
14 background and her husband was real quiet. He was around but he never said a word
15 except hello and that kind of thing. Very reticent guy. It turned out that he had been an
16 official of some kind in the Saigon government. He had gotten out with the boat people
17 and so forth in 1975, although I don't think they went in the boat. I think they did better
18 than that because I think they were probably fairly well to do and they were both highly
19 educated. Then here they were running this little restaurant in Wheaton, Maryland. We
20 got to where we really liked her. They eventually closed the restaurant. It was kind of a
21 big disappointment to us that we sort of lost contact with them. That happened at several
22 other Vietnamese restaurants. Then I would run into Vietnamese just in various places in
23 your daily life. Largely as a result of that experience I would engage them in
24 conversation occasionally say a few words in Vietnamese would please them. I found
25 out that they were great people, that they were real people and they were great people. I
26 was very impressed with the ones like the restaurant family who had managed to accept a
27 considerable change in their station in life. They were doing what immigrants to this
28 country have done for generations, which is to work hard so that they could educate their
29 kids and buy a better future for them, I was impressed by that. I'm always impressed by
30 that kind of diligence. I admired them. I admired their ability to adjust and I admired

1 their values. But I toyed with the idea of going back. I still was reluctant to do that. I
2 guess we talk about that later on.

3 RV: Yes, sir. So was it really hard to see them as people in Vietnam?

4 TE: Yeah. Intellectually and rationally you knew they were people, but
5 emotionally and subconsciously we regarded them as not human.

6 RV: Was that common among your men?

7 TE: Absolutely.

8 RV: How about in general with all the soldiers you came in contact with while
9 you were there in country?

10 TE: Yeah, in fact it was so prevalent and in such an extreme that leaders I
11 certainly found it to be true had to consciously try to ameliorate that feeling. For
12 example the troops were prone to even to anxious to mutilate, to cut off ears, that kind of
13 stuff. I don't know exactly what well-spring of emotion that comes from but it was
14 definitely there. Somehow and I have no idea how I was smart enough to figure this out
15 under those conditions. But somehow or another I felt like there was a limit to which
16 these kids could be allowed to go and still expect them to be able to readjust and come
17 back and be a normal American person again back in our society.

18 RV: You sensed that there at the time?

19 TE: Yeah. I really don't know why. I mean I'm amazed that I did and kind of
20 proud of the fact that I did. I certainly shared their frustration and their fury and their
21 desire to lash out and to strike back. I knew there was a point past which we couldn't go.
22 I just wouldn't let them and they knew that, so they didn't.

23 RV: Can you give me an example? How would you rein them in? What would
24 you say to them?

25 TE: Well, occasionally we would come across somebody who had a necklace
26 made of ears or teeth or those kinds of things. The first time I saw it I said, "Wow this
27 goes too far." I mainly communicated this kind of stuff through the staff NCOs, through
28 the gunnery sergeant because that's just the way the Marine Corps worked in terms of
29 just the day-to-day control of behavior and so forth of the troops and minor disciplinary
30 matters. That was done within non-commissioned ranks. Usually it would only bring a
31 disciplinary issue to an officer if the NCO decided that they needed some sort of official

1 punishment. But the day-to-day handling of that sort of thing was relegated to a gunnery
2 sergeant. That was sort of understood in the Marine Corps that the gunny was the guy
3 that sort of was the father and the schoolmaster and he took care of that kind of stuff. In
4 many ways, protected the troopers and took care of minor disciplinary matters without
5 having it become an official part of their records and so forth. So I took the gunnies aside
6 and told them that that wasn't going to happen here. If it did there was going to be
7 severe repercussions. Usually that was enough. That level of discussion and that way of
8 issuing edicts and so forth went very well.

9 RV: Did you hear any discussion of or incidents of fragging while you were
10 there?

11 TE: None. I had not ever even heard about them while I was there. When I came
12 back I heard discussions about it. I did witness a few examples of what I thought was
13 adverse troop reaction to the behavior of officers. I certainly never heard of or even
14 perceived that meant doing physical harm to them. I mean the vast majority of officers
15 were there to accomplish a mission and look out for their troops. Occasionally you
16 would run across one that seemed or at least projected the image of being in it for
17 himself; for decorations or promotions or whatever. Troops could pick up on that. It's
18 amazing how quickly they can pick up on that. In Vietnam, you've got to remember now
19 I spent thirteen months in combat; out in contact. We didn't have time for a lot of this
20 foolishness, drugs and alcohol and fragging. Most of that stuff in my experience
21 occurred in units that were maybe in more secure bases and they had time to get into
22 mischief. We didn't. From dawn to dusk everyday we were busy. When dusk came we
23 were tired as hell and went to sleep if we could. We were busy all the time. I remember
24 one of my letters saying in May and June and early July we were up under triple canopy
25 and west of Da Nang most of the time. I said we went up there May fifteenth and two
26 days later it was July fourth. I mean that's just the way it was; time was fully occupied.
27 The troops recognized in the combat situation that the best chance they had of getting out
28 of there alive and getting home was if they had an officer who was competent; who cared
29 about them and most of all was very good at the use of supporting arms. Because that
30 was as I told before the major advantage we had over the enemy. If they recognized that
31 you were those things far from wishing you harm they would go out of their way to

1 protect you. I had many instances in which troops, corporals, lance corporals would stop
2 me and tell me that I was putting myself in an exposed position or getting too close to
3 danger and get me out of there or try to get me out of there. It wasn't that they loved me.
4 They knew that I was their ticket home.

5 RV: When did that happen?

6 TE: That happened often.

7 RV: Can you give me an example?

8 TE: I think it's common for aggressive, hard charging lieutenants when they first
9 get there to want to—if not walk point, move very close to the front and get themselves to
10 every point of action and get involved in the action. I think that's important and
11 necessary because you can't conduct a unit, you can't control an engagement if you don't
12 know what's going on. But you can over do it. Let me tell you a story, not about me but
13 somebody else that illustrates the point. When I went to Vietnam, in 1998, the trip back
14 there was a fairly large group. I think there were over sixty of us. One of the guys that
15 was along was an Episcopal minister who had parts of both his legs blown off. He of
16 course—everybody got to know him very well. He was an important, valuable part of the
17 group. There was one other guy along who was sort of very quiet, reserved kind of guy.
18 One of my friends was along, the kind of guy who seeks out those kinds of people and
19 goes out of his way to engage them and make them part of the group. So my friend Jay
20 started talking to this guy. It turned out this guy had been a corporal and had been over
21 there and he told us this story. He said the reason he came back, this story was one of the
22 reasons he came back. He said that he had been in a unit in the 26th Marines, the 1st
23 Battalion of the 26th Marines; I think it was Bravo Company. They had a new lieutenant.
24 This lieutenant was a hard charger and the first day they went out on patrol and he was up
25 there walking with the point. This went on for a week or so. Finally this corporal took
26 him aside and said, "Lieutenant, it's not your job to walk point. That's our job. You
27 have to let us do our job. We need you. We want you back a little farther." So the next
28 day they went out on patrol in the rice paddy area. The lieutenant was out walking point
29 and he tripped a booby trap and it blew off both his legs. They medevaced him out of
30 there. This corporal recognized it was irrational but somehow or other he felt like he had
31 jinxed him or something. He felt guilty about that ever since. He just felt that if he went

1 back and spent some time with some Marines in Vietnam, it might help him get over it.
2 Well, you probably know where this story's going. The Episcopal minister when we had
3 talked to him, he'd only been there such a short time that he didn't even remember what
4 his unit was. Well, it turned out it was the same guy. This was totally serendipitous that
5 these two guys from the three million people that had been to Vietnam should end up in a
6 group of about forty-five that went back together. One of the things that the priest
7 wanted to do, was he wanted to go back to the spot where he had lost his legs. So it took
8 us a while because Jay and I were pretty good with maps, but the area had changed so
9 much that we spent most of the morning with a small bus and a group of us running
10 around until we were able to pin point the area where he had gone out. So we walked out
11 on that rice paddy and I've told this story many times and I get a little choked up every
12 time I say it because the two of them walked off alone. The guy was in his wheelchair
13 but he could walk with hand crutches with this corporal's help. They went out there in
14 that rice paddy dike and stood there for a while. But that's an example what I'm talking
15 about.

16 RV: That's a very good example.

17 TE: The troops wanted you to let them do their job and they wanted you to do
18 yours.

19 RV: You mentioned a couple of discipline problems, not fragging type but just
20 problems within the ranks. Can you describe or give me those examples?

21 TE: Probably the most, I don't know whether this is necessarily a discipline
22 issue. But the most common form of misbehavior and the most dangerous involved
23 weapons. You take a bunch of eighteen and twenty year old kids and you give them a
24 bunch of loaded weapons there's going to be accidents. So there were those. There
25 would be instances in which it was not clear that a troop was paying full time and
26 attention when he should be such as on duty at night and that kind of thing. If the guy
27 fell asleep and just left the whole unit exposed, that was one thing. Sort of nodding off or
28 on a cold night huddling in a poncho or poncho liner maybe too low that kind of thing
29 was regarded as unacceptable and endangering. Things like that basically. Nothing
30 major.

1 RV: How did you deal with this issue and idea and the reality of death that was
2 around you everyday especially as a leader, an officer?

3 TE: You know I never thought about that. I often said, and I still believe that
4 most of us thought we were bullet proof. I always said if I really thought there was any
5 significant chance that they were going to kill me I certainly wouldn't have gone. But to
6 somehow or other I'm sure you've heard this a million times. The human mind is a
7 remarkable instrument. It protects you. It adjusts. After a while you sort of dehumanize
8 the enemy, we sort of demythologize or dehumanize death. I mean when you read in
9 books new troops coming in and watching a truck load of body bags being loaded on the
10 plane, you would think my God that would just sap any resolve and destroy your self
11 confidence and be emotionally unacceptable. But at that age, you're so wrapped up in
12 what you're doing that you just sort of wall it off and move on I think. One of the
13 criticism I always have of war movies, you know they've gotten more and more realistic.
14 But even in *Saving Private Ryan* these scenes in which a member of small unit gets killed
15 and while they're still under fire other troops sort of gather around and mourn his
16 passing. That doesn't happen. If it did happen the platoon commander would make sure
17 it didn't. When you're in combat, when these bullets are flying around you've got to deal
18 with that. After that's over you can mourn the dead and so forth. As nearly as I could
19 tell, every person over there that was in my unit felt the same way. It was just something
20 you dealt with. One thing I do remember is I don't understand this and I don't offer an
21 explanation for it. You would run into people over there in talks they would indicate that
22 they didn't think they were going to make it and they usually didn't. One example I
23 remember is we had this kid PFC (Private First Class) Irwin Sobel. Right after the siege
24 started up at Khe Sanh we were living in sandbag bunkers that were built above ground.
25 It became obvious that those were death traps so we quickly tunneled into the earth. But
26 before we did that Sobel was laying in his bunk one day inside one of those sandbag
27 bunkers and an enemy RPG round hit the outside just where he was lying. It took off his
28 left leg at the knee. You know we had corpsmen on him right away. We stopped the
29 bleeding and we treated him for shock. We got him medevaced in twenty minutes. It
30 never occurred to me that he wouldn't survive that wound. But he didn't. He was one of
31 those guys who had this premonition of death and spoke about it often. Maybe

1 psychologically he wasn't prepared to deal with the shock I don't know. I don't have an
2 explanation for it. It's a phenomenon I have remarked on many times and I remember it
3 well.

4 RV: Is that something that you tried to suppress if guys continuously in your unit
5 talked about well, "I know I'm going to die. I'm not going to make it," or that kind of
6 attitude? Did you have the gunnies say, "Hey let's not have that?"

7 TE: We all did. Everybody's reaction to that. Nobody wanted to hear that. It
8 acknowledged mortality. Like I said the thing that got each of us individually along I
9 think was the feeling that these other guys might be mortal, but I'm not. You can't kill
10 me. I remember the first time I heard a bullet fly over my head. I said, "Oh my God. I
11 think I might have made a big mistake." (Laughs)

12 RV: Before we move to Khe Sanh, anything else you want to talk about in your
13 time from September to December '67?

14 TE: Let me look here. I actually made some notes last night of things I wanted to
15 make sure I didn't miss. I think the only thing I had from that time was the County Fair.
16 Yeah, I think we can move on.

17 RV: Tell me how you got to Khe Sanh. Was it more of an emergency call that
18 they needed more bodies there?

19 TE: We were told we were moving out of Camp Evans. We took a truck convoy
20 north. The word was that we were going out. They were in the process then of building
21 the McNamara Wall. They were putting a new series of firebases sort of slightly in front
22 of and in between the existing ones. So this one was going to be called A-3. It was going
23 to be just to the west and slightly north of Con Thien. In the fall of 1967 Con Thien was
24 the hot point in the northern Marine Corps area of Vietnam, just below the DMZ. It was
25 a small hill in terms of elevation, but it looked over the DMZ. There was always a
26 battalion up there. They were always taking incoming and there were a lot of probing
27 attacks. It was just the hot spot. We all felt like, "Wow, we're going right up there to the
28 DMZ. We're going from a rice paddy war to the real war." So we were pretty nervous.
29 So we packed up got in the trucks and went to Dong Ha. We got there; early evening sort
30 of left the airfield to places where we were going to bivouac for the night. Just about the
31 time we got where we were supposed to pitch camp for the night the word came, "Get

1 back on the trucks, we're going back to the landing zone and we're going to Khe Sanh."
2 I had told you about the reaction I had to the tactical position at Khe Sanh when we were
3 coming through Okinawa. My thought was, "Oh my God they're attacking Khe Sanh and
4 we're going to fly right into the middle of it." So we got on helicopters and they flew us
5 out there. They landed us on the airstrip; we had our flak jackets buttoned, our helmets
6 buckled and our weapons at high port. We came off there ready to go to war. I
7 remember I was running off next to Matt Caulfield who had been my company
8 commander and was now the major, the S-3. You know we took a look around and we
9 saw these mountains to the north and west hovering over the airfield. Even as we were
10 running I turned to Caulfield and says, "It looks like Dien Bien Phu to me."

11 RV: I knew you were going to say that. (Laughs)

12 TE: We get off the airstrip and life is normal. Guys are strolling down the road
13 on their way to the enlisted man's club to have a beer. Nothing's going on. They sort of
14 wondered what they hell we were doing there. Our whole battalion Sparrowhawks in on
15 short notice. They didn't even have any room for us. So they sent us outside the wire to
16 the west area a little bit. Said, "Here you guys can camp here." So that's what we did.
17 We built sort of an add on, an annex to the base. We extended the wire and dug our little
18 holes and that's where we lived. I remember we were right next to the SOG-3 (Studies
19 and Observation Group) which was one of the Army black units that flew unmarked
20 helicopters and so forth. That's how we got there and that's what we did.

21 RV: How long did you stay in that position before you moved out to the hill?

22 TE: I stayed there until we moved out to the hill. What we did was what we were
23 doing before, we would run operations. I remember my company ran a couple of
24 operations out into the jungle. The terrain there was very different than what we had
25 been used to. The mountains were a lot higher. The vegetation was a lot heavier. It was
26 very difficult terrain to move in. We ran a patrol along the ridgeline, high ridgeline that
27 overlooked Route 9. We were on the south side of Route 9. Route 9 ran east and west
28 and was the only surface link that Khe Sanh had with the rest of Vietnam. It had actually
29 already been compromised because it was so easy to ambush Route 9 virtually anywhere
30 along it. I think at that point in late December it had already been in effect closed by the
31 NVA. We ran a couple of other operations.

1 RV: What were the operations?

2 TE: It was basically taking the company and patrolling, looking for signs of the
3 NVA. We didn't know about it. You talk about intelligence. Now looking back on it
4 and having read books I know that at a much higher level they had learned that the
5 normal infiltration pattern by which units coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and Laos
6 would turn east and infiltrate toward Quang Tri City and Hue. The Marines had been at
7 Khe Sanh from April and May of '67 all through that summer. Basically after those hill
8 fights there was very little contact. What basically happened, we figured out later, was
9 the Marines from Khe Sanh would patrol out about four thousand meters in any direction.
10 So the enemy just started passing them to the south about five thousand meters away.
11 There just was no contact. But intelligence had discovered that those patterns were
12 changing. They were infiltrating both south and north of us at a much greater volume
13 than they had been. So Westmoreland was concerned about a build up around Khe Sanh.
14 Nobody's ever quite convinced anybody else as to why Khe Sanh was there.
15 Westmoreland says that it was there, we were basically bait because he was hoping the
16 enemy would mass and try and do a Dien Bien Phu and then he could blow them away.
17 Other people say we were out there to protect against infiltration from the A Shau Valley
18 into Hue and Quang Tri. Whatever reason we were there, we weren't doing much of it in
19 the summer time. Things had changed and I think Westmoreland thought that the enemy
20 was massing for an attempt to take Khe Sanh. He wanted to be prepared for that. We
21 were brought in to strengthen the base. There were more units brought in after we were
22 to strengthen Khe Sanh in case there was an enemy attempt to get it.

23 RV: What was the mood on the base in December 1967?

24 TE: Pretty relaxed. I remember Christmas Day sitting there in this little—we just
25 dug a little hole and went down about two feet and had a little poncho tent over it. I was
26 sitting there with a gunny. They served us a turkey dinner, which wasn't bad. There
27 were some helicopters flying around playing Christmas carols and trailing red and green
28 smoke, troops playing softball. We played softball until the softball went into the wire
29 where the trip wires were so then they switched to football. Everybody was sitting there
30 writing letters home, it was pretty relaxed. That changed pretty quickly. Again we didn't
31 know about this build up. We didn't even know why we were there. So we were kind of

1 surprised, but on January second we had a listening post out in front of our position. In
2 the middle of the night this listening post calls in and says they've got movement, which
3 wasn't unusual. After a while they said they could identify four or five or maybe more
4 individuals moving across their front or just to their right rear. Well the first thing we did
5 being Mike Company and having had these problems before we alerted everybody. This
6 listening post was not mine. It was Lima Company. I think it was Lima. But we all
7 checked to make sure we knew where all of our various patrols were so that these guys
8 couldn't be friendly. They were so concerned about that that battalion commander told
9 the company commander of Lima to send a lieutenant and a couple of troops out there to
10 assess the situation and make sure that we weren't running into friendlies. So they did.
11 As they moved out and got near these guys, these four or five people they heard them
12 moving and they moved away from them very rapidly. So the LP (listening post) was
13 permitted to open up on them and they did. What it turned out to be was they had killed
14 four Vietnamese officers, a colonel, a lieutenant colonel and two majors. One guy had
15 gotten away. There was a blood trail and it was clear that he had cut a map case off of
16 the colonel and disappeared into the jungle. They followed him in but they never found
17 him. What it turned out to be was obviously these NVA had a sand table or some kind of
18 a reconstruction of the combat base out in the jungle they were studying. We had added
19 that new annex onto it. They needed to reconnoiter that. So they were walking along in
20 the middle of the night with their maps out. And walking along our wire and marking
21 where all the wire was and where the claymores were and everything else. They had the
22 audacity to do that. Of course we all thought that was pretty bizarre. You look at it now
23 in the context of all that was going on you recognize what was happening. They were
24 obviously part of the unit that was assigned to try to take the combat base.

25 RV: Right. When were you moved to the hill?

26 TE: This is a long story.

27 RV: Okay.

28 TE: Good story. January nineteenth; what happened was on January eighteenth I
29 think it was. Yeah. January eighteenth a recon unit, Marine recon unit was on the north
30 side of Hill 881 North. They ran into a large enemy unit and they got badly mauled. A
31 couple killed and several wounded, it was difficult extraction by helicopter. I think there

1 was one wounded guy. I'm not sure they left anybody behind. I know they left behind a
2 radio and some radio shackles, code sheets that enabled you to know what
3 frequency to use radios on. Well that was a major gaffe. Captain Dabney had India
4 Company and they were on 881 South, which is about two thousand meters south of 881
5 North. He was told to send a platoon out there on the next day to try to get those shackles
6 and they had a recon unit along to reinsert a new recon unit. Well, they only got
7 about halfway to 881 North. They ran into heavy enemy resistance. So they pulled back.
8 So the battalion decided they were going to send a whole company out the next day. So
9 they alerted Mike Company and told me to get ready and we would fly up there. I
10 thought we were just going to be there for a day. We actually thought we were going to
11 be the unit that went out to 881 North. So I went up there and I actually left my 3rd
12 Platoon behind. Actually at that point I was still the XO, but we went up there and it
13 turned out the battalion decided that what we would do is Mike Company would hold
14 India Company's position on the hill. Dabney, who was much more familiar with the
15 terrain, would take all of India Company and they would run out there to 881 North the
16 next morning. The whole battalion staff flew in. So right after dawn on January 20, 1968
17 India Company struck off the hill. It was down this very steep slope to the north. They
18 got down into the valley well below the hill. In between 881 South and 881 North was a
19 couple of lower lying hills which we named Objective One and Objective Two. So in the
20 early morning India Company started moving up to these two intermediate objectives,
21 which were basically vegetated with high elephant grass, but not trees so we could
22 actually see their progress from the hill. So picture this. We're on top—the battalion
23 staff and Mike Company are on top of 881 South which is all vegetation had blown off,
24 so it's very barren. It's the last high hill in Vietnam before you get to the Laotian border,
25 which is about eight miles away. So from the top of this hill you can see twenty miles
26 into Laos, and of course it can be seen from that distance. Between the hill and the
27 Laotian border is a lower area of heavy vegetation jungle. Well, Dabney's hill had a
28 huge command bunker, a big square sandbagged structure with a heavy roof and so forth.
29 So we all get up on top of the hill, on top of the bunker. It was a big flat surface up there.
30 We're well elevated. The battalion commander, all of his staff, me, all the air
31 observation guys we got our folding chairs and our binoculars. We got up on top of this

1 damn bunker. We observe this company in the attack. It's almost like some sort of
2 training exercise. It's a beautiful day; it's sunny. The vegetation isn't that high on
3 Objective One and Two so we can watch them move up there. So we're sitting there
4 having a great time. As they moved up on top of Objective Two, the 3rd Platoon of India
5 Company ran into heavy resistance. The guys who made the top of the hill were pinned
6 down by .50 caliber machine gun crossfire. So early on in that Tom Brindley who was
7 the 3rd Platoon commander and who had incidentally been the XO of Mike Company and
8 therefore was the guy I relieved when I took over Mike Company, got killed. They were
9 taking several wounded. The wounded were fairly severely wounded of course there was
10 no way they could get a helicopter in there. A significant amount of time ensued as
11 Dabney maneuvered people over there to help extract the wounded and so forth. In the
12 mean time, Mike Thomas, who was the lieutenant who had relieved me as the platoon
13 commander of 2nd Platoon India Company was moving up on Objective One. He had
14 with him; he was in the right flank. He had with him a recon unit that was supposed to be
15 inserted when they got to 881 North, left behind. Well the .51 caliber machine gun
16 opened up on that right flank. There were several wounded guys with the reconnaissance
17 unit, which was down on sort of the right shoulder of the hill. So Thomas decided he had
18 to go down and get those guys because they were wounded badly enough that they
19 couldn't get them up there. So he worked his way down the hill and he picked up one of
20 these guys and he carried him up to the top of the hill. I'm watching all of this through
21 binoculars. So after he makes it back up there, he gets up and starts down the hill to do it
22 again and drops like a rock. The radio call comes in that India Two is hit. I saw him go
23 down. It turns out he had taken a .50 caliber machine gun bullet right between his eyes.
24 He was dead. Two platoon commanders have already been killed and there were a bunch
25 of guys wounded. So it took most of the rest of the morning and into the early afternoon
26 to take care of this situation. We from the hill, on top of the hill could see all this going
27 on. We saw some of the tracer rounds from the .50 calibers and we thought we knew
28 where they were. We called artillery, which didn't get them. We called in fixed wing
29 aircraft jets. So we ran bombing runs for a couple of hours before we finally got these
30 .50 caliber machine guns. They must have been dug in pretty well. So about fifteen
31 hundred our emergency medevacs had been medevaced. Fifty caliber enemy machine

1 guns have been neutralized and Captain Dabney is ready to kick ass and take names. Just
2 as he's ready to really start moving aggressively over these objectives toward 881 North
3 we get a call from the regimental headquarters back at Khe Sanh, our whole battalion
4 headquarters was sitting up on top of this bunker, that they want India Company recalled
5 and brought back to the hill as soon as possible. Well Dabney was pissed. He had been
6 sitting there taking it all day and now he was prepared to dish it out. He didn't like the
7 idea of being called back. It took about a half hour to cajole and order him to come back.
8 So finally they come trudging back up the hill. We learned later what had happened was
9 at about noon time an NVA had come walking up to the gates of Khe Sanh with his hand
10 on his head waving a white flag or a handkerchief. You may know this story. I don't
11 know whether you do or not but it's been in some of the books. So they brought this guy
12 in, they started talking to him. It turns out he's an NVA first lieutenant. His story is that
13 six months before or whatever it was—he'd been in the NVA, Vietnamese Army for
14 fourteen years. He was the executive officer of a rocket company or something. His
15 company and a bunch of other guys had all left North Vietnam six months before. They
16 hiked out to the Ho Chi Minh Trail, went down through Laos, just as they got into Laos
17 they were hit by a B-52 strike, which had about 50 percent casualties. The rest of them
18 moved on. They finally get down, even with South Vietnam so they turn east and they
19 come into South Vietnam. As soon as they cross the border they get hit by another B-52
20 strike with a further 50 percent casualties. Now they're down to 25 percent. One of the
21 casualties in the second raid is the company commander, his company commander. The
22 battalion commander who takes an officer who is junior to him and makes him the
23 company commander. So at this point this first lieutenant says, "That's it. I've had
24 enough." So he puts his hands on his head and he marches into the combat base, telling
25 them all about this. He's also telling them in addition the whole order of battle of the
26 entire unit that was walking down with them; he's telling them all about their plans. The
27 plans are for his regiment to attack the 881 South that night, another regiment to attack
28 861 that night, which is another hill outpost, manned by Kilo Company between 881
29 South and the combat base. Then at dawn they were going to attack the combat base. So
30 the guys that are interrogating him are scratching their heads and said, "This is an awful
31 lot of information and an awful lot of detail for a first lieutenant to know." So they're

1 beginning to suspect that this is a plant. But everybody says, "What do we have to lose
2 by preparing to be attacked? If they don't occur they don't occur." So that was why they
3 decided they wanted Dabney back on the hill because they wanted a maximum effort that
4 night. So at about midnight, 861 is attacked in force and in fact overrun. The night of
5 January 20 or 21, 1968. Eight eighty-one is twenty meters higher than 861 and maybe
6 fifteen hundred meters away or something like that. We ended up firing all of our 81 mm
7 mortar ammunition in support of 861 Kilo Company. We ended up doing a lot of direct
8 fire with 105 artillery pieces and 106 recoilless rifles to help scratch their back. We were
9 just firing right at the top of the hill because the enemy had overrun. The Marines were
10 in trenches and stuff and the enemy was the only people running around on top of the hill.
11 In fact in the morning they called in an air strike on top of the hill to clean off the enemy
12 and got them out of there. Eight eighty-one was never actually attacked, the theory being
13 that all those guys that we'd blown up during the day was the regiment that was supposed
14 to attack us so they were not effective anymore. At about five o'clock in the morning
15 they start flying rockets into the combat base, Khe Sanh combat base. The first rocket
16 that comes in lands in the ammo dump and it blows up fifteen hundred tons of
17 ammunition, which was quite a show.

18 RV: I can imagine.

19 TE: Then there were probing attacks around the combat base but they didn't
20 actually attack in force. So it turned out that most of what this guy told us was true.
21 Anyway that's the story of how we got to the hill. At that point intelligence knew that
22 there were three divisions of NVA surrounding the Khe Sanh combat base and that we
23 were effectively cut on Hill 881 South. They flew a few helicopters in and got the
24 battalion staff out but they decided to leave Mike Company up there. So the hill sort of
25 was two knobs connected by a saddle. So India Company took the bigger knob and they
26 sent Mike Company down to the smaller knob and that's where we stayed for the rest of
27 the siege.

28 RV: Tell me about how you lived there on that hill.

29 TE: Well, when we first got there, they had a trench line and there was a wire of
30 course. The trench line that was maybe eighteen inches deep. Most of the troops lived in
31 sort of square sandbag bunkers that were fairly sizeable. Inside they might have been

1 10x10. There would be six or eight guys in there and that's where they'd sleep. They'd
2 man the trenches during the day. The reason given for the fact that the trenches weren't
3 deeper was this was just really hard clay, almost like rock. Digging was really difficult.
4 You'd bend your E tool trying to dig this stuff up. Well, 881 started taking incoming
5 almost immediately before anybody realized there was a Tet Offensive. We were getting
6 these mortars and rockets that were landing up there. It was just terrifying. I remember I
7 was just scared to death.

8 RV: Was it twenty-four hours or was it a certain time they would do it?

9 TE: It was twenty-four hours and it was sporadic. More during the day really.
10 We quickly figured out that anytime that we were obviously under observation. Anytime
11 anybody moved on the hill they would shoot at them. They had snipers shooting at them
12 and mortars. I told you earlier about the RPG that blew off Sobel's leg. We had a
13 number of other casualties. It became obvious immediately that these sandbag bunkers
14 were death traps. So the word went out we were moving into the trenches. Well, under
15 impetus of enemy incoming the dirt got a lot softer. It wasn't long before we had these
16 trenches. In fact they ended up digging them too deep some places. Some of these
17 places the trench lines were down eight feet. So I had to have them dig firing steps so
18 they could step up and see out over the trench line so they could use them as defensive
19 firing positions. In relatively short order, I'd say within a week we were living in the
20 trenches. Troops would live in there and the interior wall of the trench they would scoop
21 out a hole. That's where they would sleep. That's what we did.

22 RV: So you were protected unless a round fell in the trench itself?

23 TE: That's right. We quickly learned that moving around during daytime was an
24 invitation to death or worse, death or injury. So during daytime we just stayed in the
25 trenches and kept a look out. At nighttime we'd have a more aggressive lookout. We
26 would put out listening posts, and at least initially a few ambushes, but not very far out.

27 RV: How far out would you put them?

28 TE: The hill was very steep. The north face was not quite straight down but it
29 was more than forty-five degrees so we would just put an LP out, fifteen or twenty yards
30 in front of the wire. On the east nose it was a little more gradual. That was up where
31 Dabney was. He would put some ambush patrols out maybe five hundred meters or

1 something like that. As the Tet Offensive began and the siege went on we got word
2 directly from Westmoreland's headquarters that nobody was to go outside the wire under
3 any circumstances. I must admit that I was not willing to sit inside that wire blind all
4 night every night.

5 RV: Essentially that order came from Saigon?

6 TE: Because when it came I disputed it in my Marine Corps chain of command.
7 They told me that they didn't decide it that it was decided in Saigon. It wasn't up to me.
8 So I just ignored them and I sent my listening posts out every night anyway.

9 RV: Did you really?

10 TE: Yeah. How was Westmoreland going to know? He certainly never visited.
11 Nobody did. Anyway that's how we lived. I actually moved into a bunker not quite on
12 the top center of the hill but a little back from the trench line that had been dug by the
13 NVA. It was in an existing bunker. We sort of enlarged it a little bit and we put an
14 overhead on it. That overhead ended up being six feet deep. We had gotten ourselves a
15 couple of pieces of airplane planking, the kind of steel planking they used to make the
16 airstrips. That was the first layer. Then we put sandbags, rocks, logs, everything we
17 could think of so that whole overhead was at least 6'6. I lived in there with my two radio
18 operators. They actually dug another part of the hole, sort of a second storage of the
19 damn thing. Deeper back in there, but that's where they slept. I never knew that I had
20 any inkling of claustrophobia. But the first time I went back in that thing I couldn't stand
21 it. So I never went back there. I stayed up right by the front door.

22 RV: How was communication on the hill?

23 TE: Communications was very good. I talked before about the fact that we had
24 PRC-25 radios all the way down to squad level. When this first started I remember just
25 being so scared. It was almost like paralysis. I just was convinced that Khe Sanh was
26 the focus of the free world. President Johnson and everybody between him and me was
27 doing everything they could to get us out of there or to do something. It turns out I
28 wasn't that far from correct. I discovered later Johnson did have a mock up of Khe Sanh
29 in the basement and would prowl around there at night offering suggestions. But if you
30 had told me on the first couple of days that we were going to be up there for seventy-
31 seven days I don't know what I would have done. I might very well have shot myself. I

1 don't think I could have taken that. It was hard enough to take it hour-by-hour or day-by-
2 day. But then within a couple of weeks you adjust. I mean it was just amazing how
3 resilient human beings are.

4 RV: How do you adjust to that fear?

5 TE: Well, for one thing you sort of overcome the fear. It's hard to believe that
6 sitting there getting mortared and rocketed you can adjust to that, you can accept it, but
7 you do. I'll tell you now one of the stories I've told most often. I got wounded twice up
8 there. The second time was probably mid-February. We'd been under these conditions
9 now for a little more than three weeks. The trench lines have been dug down. The troops
10 have actually found some extra comm wire and strung it around the trench so that the few
11 radios can be hooked into extra speakers that we found from various places taken out of
12 downed helicopters and stuff. We had music piped into the trenches if you can believe
13 that.

14 RV: Tom, let me pause just for a second to change out the disk. Okay, go ahead.

15 TE: So we had very good and effective communications. Early on as we were
16 digging the trenches, actually January thirty-first is when I became company commander
17 because Captain Gilece decided to move from one side of the hill to other instead of
18 going around a trench line during the middle of the day. Jumped up and ran across the
19 top of the hill and a sniper shot him in the leg. So I got him medevaced. Actually I was
20 wounded the first time during a medevac. We got him out of there. It was a flesh wound.
21 It went straight through the thigh but didn't hit any bone or anything or an artery. I
22 figured he'll be back in three weeks. That was January thirty-first that was the beginning
23 of the Tet Offensive. As it turns out anybody who was stabilized they put them back as
24 far as they could to keep beds available closer so the front for the more seriously
25 wounded. The next time I heard from him he was in the Philadelphia Naval Hospital and
26 he never came back. The day before I became a first lieutenant I became the company
27 commander of Mike Company on Hill 881. So right after that the gunny decided he
28 didn't want me running out of my bunker down to the trench line. So he dug a
29 connecting trench from the bunker down to the trench. Then we all moved underground.
30 So going back to this adjustment, this resilience. We quickly settled into a pattern of
31 staying underground and out of sight during the day and doing whatever we needed to do

1 at night but you sort of got tired of that. You sort of started feeling like a rat particularly
2 since it was sort of monsoonal up there and it was foggy and rainy and cold a lot of the
3 time. So one day in mid-February it was a nice sunny day. One of the first we've had.
4 I'm sitting outside the bunker. The bunker entrance to it the door was down about two
5 feet because of a dip in the terrain protruded about two feet above the surface. In order to
6 prevent any shrapnel from blowing through that door we had to put a sandbag wall about
7 two feet away from it. So I'm sitting on top of this sandbag wall sort of drying out and
8 looking around and soaking up the sun. By this time most of what the enemy shot at us
9 was 120 mm Russian mortars which were pretty devastating.

10 RV: Could you hear them coming?

11 TE: You could hear them come out of the tube. You could hear the thump. We
12 had figured out you had twenty-six seconds from the time you heard the thump until the
13 round landed, a high trajectory. So I'm sitting up there and I hear this thump and I'm
14 saying to myself, "You know these guy are watching me. I'm not going to scurry into
15 my hole like a rat. I'm just going to sit here."

16 RV: Were you counting in your head?

17 TE: Yeah, so about fifteen seconds go by and I say, "You know this could be
18 pretty dumb if you heard it come out of the tube and because of false pride it landed on
19 you." So slowly showing my disdain slowly I got off the hill and sort ambled in through
20 the door of the hooch. Just as I get through the door the round lands, and it lands right on
21 the sandbag wall and blew me through the trench up against the far wall and filled the
22 back of my legs and my butt with shrapnel, just small pieces. It landed above me and
23 mainly it would blow dirt and pebbles and rocks down there. There really wasn't very
24 much shrapnel. The shrapnel all went out and up. But the blast blew me across the place
25 and into the far wall and so forth. So I really wasn't very badly hurt. I was shook up a
26 little bit but I wasn't badly hurt at all. But I often reflect on the potential devastating
27 effect of false pride.

28 RV: Right. What happened now with your wounds?

29 TE: Pardon?

30 RV: What happened with your wounds? Were you able to stay? Were you
31 medevaced?

1 TE: By that time we had already recognized that the most dangerous thing that
2 happened there was the landing of a helicopter. So we only medevaced emergencies. So
3 the doc patched me up a little bit. Picked a few pebbles and stuff out of the wounds and
4 patched them up and that was that. We only had three places on the hill. One was in the
5 saddle and two were up on the sort of gradual nose of sort of east of India position where
6 we could land the helicopter. By this time, we'd already had three helicopters shot down.
7 They were still there and like I said earlier we took the speakers and stuff out of them and
8 the .50 caliber machine guns. They sort of decorated our landing area. So it became
9 obvious that the enemy had at least one mortar zeroed in on each of those three areas. As
10 soon as they saw a helicopter approach when they figured that was the zone it was going
11 to land in they started pumping those rounds. So we would have helicopters feint into
12 one landing zone and then land in another but still they only had thirty or forty seconds.
13 We'd have the medevac; we had a trench line out to the landing zone. We'd have the
14 medevac in the trench with a couple of guys. As soon as the helicopter, it didn't even
15 land. As soon as it got close to the ground they'd run out throw the guy into the
16 helicopter, jump back into the trench and the helicopter would get out of there. This all
17 had to be done within thirty-five seconds. So there wasn't any coming and going from
18 the hill. There wasn't any medevacs except for emergencies.

19 RV: What about re-supplying?

20 TE: Well that became a problem. So originally what they did was they'd send a
21 helicopter in every once in a while with an external load, but that wasn't getting enough
22 up there. What they finally did, I think it was somebody back in Dong Ha or maybe
23 Quang Tri came up with this concept. Of course we didn't have secure communications.
24 So they didn't tell us about this. All we knew was one day we were told to stand by for
25 something unusual. A couple of A-4 jets came streaming up each side of the hill. On
26 each side of the hill was sort of a little valley. They were flying below the hill they were
27 trailing smoke. Right behind them were bunch of Huey gunships. They were just
28 shooting up the whole valley and the ridgeline on either side of us with rockets and stuff.
29 We look up straight above us and there are about six CH-41 helicopters each with an
30 external load. They're flying a spiral down from above us. When they get close to the
31 hill they drop their load and they're out of there. The whole thing takes sixty seconds.

1 We've got six loads of gear. Of course the problem was we couldn't go out and get it
2 during the day. So we'd wait until night and we'd go out and get it, which brings me to
3 my favorite story. One of the problems we had initially we started out and we were a
4 little short of food and water and then a little short on ammo and then a little short on
5 food and water. Eventually by the time they started doing these gaggles. That's what we
6 called them gaggle and super gaggle, our supplies were fine. We had two C-ration meals
7 each day for each guy. Most of them would prefer to have more than that but that's what
8 they had. I know my radio operator was Moose. He was a big guy who could eat a lot.
9 It was really a hardship for him. I've never eaten as much as my size would indicate so I
10 would give him half of my food. It was interesting because one of the most valued
11 commodities on the hill became the cigarettes that were in the packs that the guys would
12 smoke. By now most of them were out of their smokes. There was a little pack of four
13 cigarettes in each C-ration. So the guys who didn't smoke traded those cigarettes for
14 canned peaches or other delicacies. I've often said troops would have been glad to pay
15 fifty dollars for one of those tiny little cans of peaches because they weren't getting their
16 money and didn't know where they were going to spend it anyway. So anyway supply
17 situation was getting better as a result of this. One of the problems, a morale problem I
18 had, maybe my most serious morale problem was mail. Mail would be brought in
19 occasionally but not very often. The first two times the mail had been brought in it was
20 all for India Company. So now it's been like three weeks since any of my troops have
21 had any mail and they are really unhappy. The gunny says, "Sir the troops are practically
22 in revolt." He said, "I heard one of them say the next time the mail comes in if it's for
23 India Company and not for Mike, they're going to attack India Company and take their
24 mail." So I mean it's getting to the point where I'm really concerned about them.

25 RV: Right.

26 TE: So I get the word one day that a gaggle is coming in. I get my binoculars
27 out. These nets are wire mesh nets and you can sort of see what's in them. Mail arrives
28 in bright red and yellow nylon bags. So I spot a bunch of bright red and yellow nylon
29 bags in one of these loads. So I tell the gunnies, "There's some mail coming in." So the
30 gaggle lands about fourteen hundred. Of course we're not going to go out there and get it
31 until dark. The troops are really antsy. They really want to go. I don't want them to

1 move right at dark because the enemy could figure that out. So about twenty-two
2 hundred I told the gunny, "Okay you can go out there and get the nets that are out in the
3 saddle between the two hills." So they go out there and I'm listening on the radio and in
4 a few minutes I hear all kinds of cursing and swearing going on out there. I called the
5 gunny and said, "What the hell is going on?" He said, "You're not going to believe this
6 sir. Somebody decided to send us some ice cream. It was in the same net as the mail and
7 it's melted all over the mail." (Laughs)

8 RV: Oh, no.

9 TE: So the troops are back here at night. They are really angry. It turns out it
10 was mail for Mike Company. If they could have found the poor mess sergeant who
11 decided to do us a favor and send us some ice cream they probably would have killed
12 them. They're licking this stuff off their mail. (Laughs) I mean it was hilarious.

13 RV: So did that help the morale problem?

14 TE: Yes, it helped a lot.

15 RV: Did these guys back at the base understand that you could not touch this
16 stuff until night?

17 TE: Apparently not. I guess probably the air wing did. This probably came from
18 who knows? It might have been my executive officer back at the base.

19 RV: It was a good thought.

20 TE: Yeah, it was a good thought.

21 RV: Yes. Let's take a break sir.

22 RV: Okay sir I wanted to ask you what happened on the night of the Tet
23 Offensive? Did anything special happen there at your hill?

24 TE: Nope.

25 RV: Did you even know there was a so-called Tet Offensive that had started?

26 TE: Not immediately. We were very isolated. Like I said we didn't have secure
27 communications. We weren't receiving I guess only occasionally we'd receive anything
28 like a *Stars and Stripes* or anything. So we really didn't know what the hell was going
29 on. Over a period of time it became obvious to us that there was general activity. We
30 certainly knew that Hue had been hit hard and that the Marines were in significant
31 contact and in combat in Hue. That actually worried us because we were afraid that

1 would divert resources from rescuing us. At that point we figured the Marine Corps was
2 going to get a couple divisions on line from down Route 9 and kick those guys out of
3 there. That didn't happen and that couldn't have happened. The Marine Corps couldn't
4 have amassed enough people to punch through I don't think in January and February at
5 that time considering the terrain. We knew a little bit about it but not really a whole lot.
6 As far as we were concerned Tet Offensive had begun on January twentieth.

7 RV: Right. Right. Did you know there was an actual siege of Khe Sanh going
8 on?

9 TE: Yeah, we figured it out. Nobody told us that but we figured out that they
10 were everywhere. They were all around us. We knew that even between January
11 twentieth, I think and January thirty-first another battalion had been brought to Khe Sanh.
12 They populated a couple of other outpost hills closer to the combat base. We knew
13 generally that was going on.

14 RV: How difficult was it for you as a leader of the men there on the hill to not get
15 those overall kinds of broader scope intelligence reports? I guess if you're not aware
16 then it might be ignorant bliss. But, did you want a bigger picture? If you did how did it
17 affect you to not get that?

18 TE: Yeah, not only there but throughout my tour. Troops would periodically ask
19 you why we did this or why we did that or what was happening next or generally how
20 what we were doing fit into the big picture. I've often thought I didn't know an awful lot,
21 but I knew a hell of a lot more than they did. I've often tried to put myself in their
22 position of just being there day after day and be told do this and do that and hurry up and
23 wait. Take this bridge and then come back and take it six months later. I think it must
24 have mentally been an awful lot harder for them than it was for me. It's sort of the same
25 thing we talked about in training when you're just one of the guys running. You're tired
26 as hell, but when you're the guy leading you've got a lot more on your mind and you
27 can't think about your fatigue. I think it was the same kind of thing. But the mental
28 aspects of the Vietnam experience were difficult enough at my level; I think for the
29 troops it must have been even worse.

30 RV: Were you able to hide your apprehensions, your fears, your stress, during the
31 seventy-seven days adequately from your men?

1 TE: Yeah, I think so. I read somewhere sometime, by another time about
2 Vietnam saying, “As long as you were just a smidgen less scared than they were, it was
3 okay.” Yeah I think I was. I certainly tried very hard at it because I recognized that they
4 took their lead from me. They were depending on me. If I showed those kinds of
5 concerns excessively at least that it would be communicable. It would be a pretty serious
6 problem. I think my primary—we weren’t engaging in much fire or maneuver. My
7 primary duty, my primary responsibility, my primary task was to keep these guys alert
8 and to help them maintain morale.

9 RV: How often would you go out and visit them in their trenches?

10 TE: Probably no more than two hours ever went by that I didn’t. Sometimes
11 more frequently than that. I would just sort of just keep making the rounds.

12 RV: Even during the day?

13 TE: Yeah. I could do it in the trenches. I could move around in the trenches. Of
14 course during the day a lot of them were sleeping. You’d go around and talk to the ones
15 that were awake. Then later on you’d talk to the ones you hadn’t talked to before. It was
16 just see and be seen kind of thing. Offer words of encouragement. Just let them know
17 somebody was paying attention, somebody cared.

18 RV: How did they respond to you?

19 TE: They responded beautifully. I think back a lot of these kids. I don’t
20 necessarily subscribe to the feeling it was the forgotten, rejected, poor the uneducated
21 who fought the Vietnam War. But there certainly was an element in these eighteen or
22 nineteen year old kids, most of whom graduated from high school, some of whom hadn’t.
23 A couple of whom had been given the option of three years in the Corps or two in jail.
24 They certainly were even then becoming aware of protestors and the troops just couldn’t
25 understand that and were really demoralized by that. I felt tremendously privileged first
26 of all to be given the responsibility to lead these guys. Secondly and even more so to be
27 accepted by them as their leader. It’s a very hard emotion to explain. I rarely am able to
28 even talk about it without getting a little choked up. I thought then that I was doing the
29 most important and significant thing that I was ever going to do. I was sort of in awe of
30 being given the responsibility, basically life and death responsibility for these kids. I felt
31 an overwhelming responsibility for getting as many of them home as I could. I thought

1 often about people that they'd left behind waiting for them. I had the unfortunate
2 opportunity on more than one occasion to write a letter to next of kin about a trooper that
3 didn't make it. Every time I did that I had this tremendous welling of emotion that didn't
4 overwhelm me but it certainly made a dramatic impression on me. The years have not
5 diminished that. I go to a reunion now and these guys who were my kids are fat old
6 bearded guys that are only a couple years younger than I am. But they are still my troops.
7 They still treat me that way. I'm still the old man. I'm still their guy. Much has been
8 written and much has been spoken about this bond that is created by men in combat. I've
9 tried many times to put it in words. It's almost impossible to put into words. I've tried to
10 explain it to people close to me. I think they understand that there is a tremendous bond
11 but to them—like my wife can never understand why I didn't stay in touch with a lot of
12 these people. I don't remember whether I told you about not knowing Moose's name, I
13 think I did. She said, "You lived in the bunker with this guy, a hole in the ground for
14 seventy-seven days and you don't know his name or where he's from?" I really did not
15 make much of an effort to stay in touch with many of these guys until I started going
16 back to reunions.

17 RV: Why not?

18 TE: I don't know why. I don't know why. I'm not that kind of person. I'm the
19 kind of guy, I've got a very good friend from college he was my roommate, but in the
20 intervening years there were probably periods where we went five years without speaking
21 to each other. But we were still good friends and we still could pick it up anytime we
22 want. In fact he called me yesterday to tell me his father died. I knew his father very
23 well. I'm that kind of a socializer. I've been criticized by that from my wife and stuff.
24 That doesn't diminish the fact that there is a bond, a feeling of kinship, not only with the
25 guys you actually served in combat with, but with any other guys that served in combat.
26 You go to the reunion and there are guys there that you didn't know. But there's an
27 unspoken bond based on the commonality of experience. Certainly with the Vietnam
28 veterans I think some of it is the "us against them" feeling that the rest of the country
29 didn't understand what we were doing. They don't understand or appreciate us now.
30 They assume we're all a bunch of messed up drug heads and all that sort of thing. We all
31 know better. Each of us has proven something to ourselves and each other that can only

1 be proven in combat. It's sort of an extreme human experience. You don't know before
2 you go how you're going to react. I was certainly apprehensive. What happens if the
3 first round I hear I get down in the bottom of the hole and won't come out? That happens
4 to some guys. You don't know which way you're going to react. The guys who talk the
5 toughest before they go over there are probably at least as likely as everybody else to be
6 found wanting. When you find out that you actually can function under those
7 circumstances it's sort of a feeling of accomplishment and liberation that admits you to
8 this pantheon of those who have done it and experienced it. You've experienced it, you
9 shared with them something that you haven't and won't ever share with your wife or your
10 kids or your parents or all your other friends. In my mind, being a leader of Marines,
11 eighteen, nineteen, twenty year old Marines in Vietnam, the company commander which
12 was as I told you before sort of the premier opportunity to do that, the best opportunity to
13 do that. Still awesome. I'm still delighted and proud of that fact that I had the
14 opportunity, was given the opportunity and was accepted by the troops as doing it pretty
15 well.

16 RV: You mentioned earlier, just a minute ago that you realized that was the most
17 important thing you would ever do in your life. How did you know that while you were
18 there? How did that dawn upon you?

19 TE: I mean it's not that remarkable really. You think about it you say, "Hey I'm
20 out here in the jungle with two hundred young Marines and I'm in charge. Whether we
21 accomplish our mission, and how many we get killed or wounded is a direct function of
22 what I do and how well I do it. I've got life and death responsibility for two hundred
23 human beings. When am I ever going to have that again?" I'm a managing partner of a
24 law firm for the last twenty-seven years. I think it's fair to say that I have a significant
25 impact on the economics of all those people and therefore, a significant impact in their
26 life, but doesn't even come close to being life and dearth.

27 RV: How often do you draw upon those experiences you had in Vietnam or did
28 you? How often did you draw upon those experiences after Vietnam later in your life?
29 We're skipping ahead. I want to continue, working there at the law firm and being in a
30 position of leadership there, how much do you draw upon your experience?

1 TE: I draw upon it in some respects, like I say, everyday but not the way I
2 expected. I have sort of a very reserved demeanor and I'm a pretty big guy. When
3 people first meet me they're almost invariably intimidated by me. I think that was
4 intentional when I was younger. Never cleaned up that act. I don't do it intentionally
5 now. As a result of that first impression people always assume that I'm going to run the
6 law firm like boot camp or I'm going to be a martinet. That's not true at all. One of the
7 reasons not is I learned in Vietnam the importance of being able and willing to delegate
8 responsibility about being willing to take a chance on people. I mean I would get my
9 small unit commanders; I would get them trained and be happy with them and boom, two
10 of them would get blown up. All of a sudden I've got to replace them. The guy who was
11 in line to replace him, I don't have any confidence in based on his performance as a
12 trooper. I can't imagine this guy is going to be a successful leader. More often than not I
13 was wrong. People rose to the occasion. If you showed confidence in them, you showed
14 trust in them, you encouraged them it's amazing. Sometimes these guys would be better
15 than the guys they replaced. So I've learned the importance of that. Probably the lesson
16 that I apply on a daily basis more than any other is the importance of relying on the
17 capabilities and the intuitions of the person in the field. Vietnam was a war in which the
18 decision about what small units were going to do almost invariably made by senior
19 officers who were in a bunker somewhere a long way from where the action was taking
20 place. In most cases, he'd never been in a situation like we were in. I mean most of the
21 majors and lieutenant colonels in the Marine Corps had never been in combat, certainly
22 not in small unit combat. The most common example is some guy back in the bunker
23 gets out his map and says, "I'm going to tell Esslinger to move India Company from here
24 to here. It's four thousand meters. I'll tell them to get moving in the morning so he can
25 be there by evening." On a map you can do it. In the jungle up around Khe Sanh
26 especially if you were going to move through an area that was potentially hostile and you
27 had to do it in a tactical situation you were lucky if you could make a thousand meters a
28 day in that kind of environment. Being pressured and ordered by colonels and majors
29 back in the rear over the radio who couldn't understand why you weren't making more
30 progress was frustrating in the extreme. In fact one of the stories I wrote down here to
31 remind you about I'll tell you now. You've heard me talk about Major Caulfield. He

1 was Captain Caulfield, my first company commander. I had a very close relationship
2 with him. For some reason he took a shine to me right away. I liked him. We were very
3 different. He was a voluble Irishman full of the Blarney from New York. In fact I loved
4 to hear him talk. Later on in the tour when we were in a static position he would bring in
5 new troops and give them an orientation speech and even though I'd heard him give it
6 dozens of times I would always make it a point to be in there because I just loved to hear
7 him talk. It always inspired me all over again. He and I remain close even today.
8 Shortly after, actually it was before Christmas at Khe Sanh, I was out on patrol, been out
9 for a couple of days. I was still a couple of thousand meters. I was on my way back to
10 the combat base about a couple thousand meters away. I figured I'd get back the next
11 day, which was Christmas. About midday on Christmas Eve he called me on the radio
12 and told me he wanted me back by dark. I said, "I can't do it." He said, "Do it." So he
13 and I had a debate over the radio. I remember saying over the radio I finally said, "You
14 know that what you're telling me to do is wrong." I said, "I'm going to do what you tell
15 me to because you're a major and I'm a lieutenant, but if any of these troops get hurt
16 because of this it's going to be on your head." So I seethed the whole way back, which
17 you basically just walk down a trail, exposing ourselves to ambush so we could get back.
18 That was the only way we could get back by dark. Nothing happened. When I got there,
19 I was thinking about it for eight hours and I was primed. I went over to the COC and
20 asked him to step outside and he did. I just exploded all over him. I said, "You taught
21 me not to do that. You taught me that in a position like that not to obey an order that
22 would endanger my troops. Then you forced me to do it. You of all people." He didn't
23 say anything. He said, "The general ordered me to have everybody back here because the
24 Christmas truce starts at dark." In fact it's interesting because when I was fifty, my wife
25 for my fiftieth birthday asked a lot of people to write letters. He was one of them. He
26 remarked on that incident in the letter.

27 RV: Really?

28 TE: Said that he was wrong and knew he was wrong. He said he ended up going
29 on to retire as a general officer and he was in charge of the basic school for a while. He
30 said he used that as an object lesson in training lieutenants ever since. I don't remember
31 why I got off on that tangent.

1 RV: You said you were wounded twice. What happened the second time?

2 TE: I was supervising a medevac and as the helicopter took off a 120mm mortar
3 came in and caught a few pieces of shrapnel in my lower leg. Actually I still have effects
4 of that in my left ankle, which is arthritic as a result of it. It certainly wasn't serious
5 enough to justify bringing in a helicopter. I think there ended up being a piece of
6 shrapnel that was in the ankle joint there that was there too long. Did some bone damage
7 and that's probably why I've got arthritis now.

8 RV: I can imagine your men seeing their commander being wounded twice and
9 them understanding about the medevac rules. It's just die or you're not going to get out.
10 You staying on line with them, having been wounded do you think that made an
11 impression upon them?

12 TE: I think it did but I don't think it probably was as dramatic as you would
13 imagine it might be. By the time we were done most of them had done the same thing. I
14 mean I don't remember the exact numbers but it's something like I went up there with
15 120 men and there were a few replacements but not many. I think those 120 men
16 accumulated something like 175 Purple Hearts up there. There were a lot of minor
17 wounds like that. It was almost impossible not to get them. But we only medevaced the
18 serious ones.

19 RV: What else happened during the seventy-seven days that you want to talk
20 about?

21 TE: I got a couple little odds and ends here. Going back, I should have thought
22 about this when you were talking about how we lived up there. When I got down onto
23 the small knoll that my company took care of for those seventy-seven days in addition to
24 the trenches not being very deep the latrine was above ground. It was sort of a box and
25 had a fifty-five gallon drum in it. You sat on over the top of that. They had put up a
26 couple of sticks on the back and stretched a poncho across it because it was windy up
27 there. So I was sitting up there. This was early on and I'm sitting up there doing my
28 business. I'm thinking there aren't too many people have a view like this when they're
29 doing their business. So I got done and I leaned down and was ready to pull up my
30 trousers and a bullet snapped through that poncho right where I'd been sitting. A sniper
31 had zeroed in on me. So I sort of hobbled down to my end of the trench, trousers around

1 my ankles. Called the gunny over and said, "That latrine will be in the trenches by
2 nightfall."

3 RV: Wow. So when you leaned over, the bullet hit where you were.

4 TE: I bent forward to pick up my trousers and it went right behind my head into
5 the poncho liner.

6 RV: My gosh.

7 TE: Another sort of moderately humorous, although it wasn't then, story. Again
8 right after I took over that part of the hill we had our own 60mm mortars. So I wanted to
9 have a couple registration points just outside the wire. I called the mightiest corporal in
10 the world that I talked about before; Corporal Arrotta was flying in air attacks in all over
11 the place. It was getting on toward dusk. I said, "Let me know when you're done." He
12 called me back after a while and he said, "Okay, I think we're done." So I had my 60mm
13 mortar people ready to fire a couple of white phosphorous rounds and get them registered
14 on certain points. So they fired the first one and the white phosphorous explodes about
15 ten meters outside our wire, which is where I wanted it. Out of the corner of my eye I
16 look up and see two F-4s rolling in. I thought, "Wow." I looked down in the valley and
17 see a big white phosphorous down there as one of the last spotting rounds fired by the
18 corporal. That was the round the Air Force was supposed to roll in on, but they saw
19 mine. So these two F-4s are rolling in on our hill. What could I do? Everybody sees
20 them they could hear them coming. We all dive into the trenches. I thought, "Oh my
21 God." So they dropped a couple of 250 pound bombs. But fortunately they dropped
22 them right on the white phosphorous. It blew our wire all to hell and shook us all up but
23 nobody got hurt. I had a few very bad moments there.

24 RV: What did you say when you called back to the base? Did you tell them,
25 report what had happened?

26 TE: Yeah, it was one of those things that happens when guys are out there with
27 guns and explosives they sometimes put it in the wrong places. Nobody was too excited
28 about it. They were delighted that nobody was hurt. Let me see anything else up there?
29 No, I don't think so.

30 RV: How did the seventy-seven days come to an end for you all up there?

1 TE: For me, right at the end of March, as a medevac helicopter came in, some
2 guy jumps off and runs out and jumps in the trenches and it turns out it's Captain Harry
3 Jenkins. He's there to relieve me as company commander of Mike Company. So the
4 next medevac we had I was one of the guys that carried the guy out there. Then after we
5 threw him into the chopper I jumped in after him. I went down to the combat base to
6 become Caulfield's assistant in the operations office, in the S-3 office. We had a new
7 battalion commander named John Studt. He was very good officer and a very proactive
8 guy. He became concerned about these sort of hodge-podge bunkers everybody had built
9 everywhere, that they weren't properly engineered and that they were going to collapse
10 on people. He ended up sort of giving me the additional duty of becoming the battalion
11 bunker officer so I would run around and inspect bunkers and make suggestions and
12 stuff. Then basically on April first the name of operation changed from Scotland to
13 Scotland II. The 1st Air Cavalry Division of the Army was assigned to help us. They
14 started trying to help us force their way up Route 9. Eventually they did and they met
15 with some Marines coming out from the combat base. So the denouement of the whole
16 thing was that on Easter Sunday of 1968, which I think was April fifteenth, we were
17 going to attack off of 881 South and take 881 North because the NVA had been up there.
18 They had used that as the primary position to fire 122mm rockets at the base. I don't
19 know if I mentioned that was one other thing we did up on the hill. It was Dabney's idea.
20 The major incoming that the base received came from three different positions, all out to
21 the west so all of those rounds passed over our hill on the way to the combat base. We
22 could hear them. Actually there was an old radar dish, a big one, maybe about ten feet in
23 diameter that was up there I guess for a radio relay station or something. So Dabney
24 positioned this thing facing west. All day everyday there would be a trooper sitting
25 inside that dish, that thing helped them to pick up sound. He had a radio connected
26 directly to the combat base. As soon as he heard anything he would call the combat base.
27 They had somebody monitoring that call. They would report, "ARTY (artillery) Co Roc
28 or rockets 365," which was a compass heading. This guy at the base had a little button
29 there that blew a truck horn. So as soon as he got that call, he pressed the truck horn and
30 the horn would blow at the combat base which gave them anywhere from five to ten
31 seconds advance notice of incoming. They could dive into trenches.

1 RV: That's interesting.

2 TE: Yeah, it is interesting. So an example of Dabney was always thinking. He
3 was a very innovative, a very iconic guy. It's almost as though he read the Marine
4 Corps book and said there's got to be a better way and he did everything differently. We
5 ended up moving the whole battalion up to 881 the second week of April. On that
6 Sunday morning we took off. I think India Company stayed on the hill and the other
7 three companies did what India Company had tried to do on January twentieth, which
8 was attack north off the hill toward 881 North. We moved over Objectives One and Two
9 on which Mike Thomas, Tom Brindley had been killed on the twentieth and started
10 climbing up 881 North. We ran into a fair amount of resistance but we were loaded for
11 bear. We had air on station. We had all kinds of pre-registered artillery. Dabney had
12 taken all the 106s the battalion had and mounted them on the north side of 881 South so
13 he could fire directly over our heads, direct fire with 106s, so if we ran into like a
14 machine gun or something we would just pop a smoke, pull back and Dabney would
15 blow it away with 106s. He had a great time doing that. We climbed the hill at about
16 fourteen hundred in the afternoon; put an American flag up on top of 881 North. We
17 took a number of casualties, but it wasn't that bad. The enemy had sort of resisted us but
18 not all out. They sort of pulled back as we came up. There weren't all that many
19 casualties but it was a pretty emotional moment for us.

20 RV: How did it feel to put that flag up there?

21 TE: Pretty damn good. We were sort of under orders not to fly the American flag
22 anywhere but we ignored that. By the way that reminds me. This is also well known.
23 The other thing Dabney did on the hill was he started raising the American flag every
24 morning. We had at least one guy Owen Matthews who ended up taking Mike Thomas'
25 place as platoon commander of the 2nd Platoon. He could play the bugle. For some
26 reason there was a bugle up there. So every morning they'd dash out of the trench and
27 play a very accelerated version "To the Colors" and they'd run this damn flag up and dive
28 back in the trenches as the mortar rounds came in. Every evening they did the same
29 thing. It got to be fairly well known. It got to be reported. So pretty soon every time we
30 got mail we would get U.S. American flags from everywhere. Dabney would take one
31 each day after it was flown and he'd mail it to one of the KIAs or severely wounded

1 guy's parents. It's funny; we never had a visit during the siege for obvious reasons.
2 Nobody came there casually. None of the senior officers, regiment or battalion or
3 division or anybody else ever landed on the hill. Dabney is very bitter about that. In fact
4 I will tell you about a Web site. He's got a ranting on there about that in which the
5 events are explained at some length. But one day, we did have during a medevac a
6 chopper came in this guy jumped off and he came into the trench. The troops brought
7 him to me. It turns out this guy is a stringer for UPI (United Press International). He's a
8 reporter and he's got his camera along. His name is Dave Powell. So he stays on the hill.
9 My recollection he wasn't there very long but he was there at least one night maybe two.
10 He went around and took a bunch of pictures and talked to the troops. Then he decided
11 he was ready to leave. So he comes over to me and says, "Okay I'm ready to leave.
12 Would you call me a helicopter?" I said, "That's not the way it works. It's too
13 dangerous to just call a helicopter. You can go out the way you came in on a medevac
14 helicopter." He wasn't too pleased about that. He starts telling me all the important
15 people he knows and threatening me. After a while I said, "Look, nothing you say is
16 going to change my mind, so this is the way it's going to happen. You're going to be
17 ready, if we have an emergency medevac you're going to be one of the guys that carries
18 him down to the LZ. After you throw him in the chopper you can jump in after him." He
19 was not pleased about that, but that's the way it went down. Actually subsequently my
20 mother sent me an article that he wrote that appeared in one of the papers, very nicely
21 promoted me to captain since he knew my name. That was the last I ever heard of him
22 until about a year or year and a half ago. I started getting e-mails from an address I didn't
23 recognize. This guy was telling me that he had pictures of us on 881. I couldn't figure
24 out who this was. Finally over a period of time I figured out who he was. He
25 volunteered to send me some of these pictures, but he used AOL (America Online, Inc.)
26 and he never could figure out how to attach them so I never got them. Then subsequently
27 Dabney who's now retired and living in Lexington, Virginia was prowling the internet.
28 He discovered the internet site of the Purple Foxes, which was the helicopter squadron
29 that was responsible for most of our medevacs and resupply. He ended up calling this
30 guy Frank Gullledge, who was a retired officer, helicopter pilot who ran that site, thanking
31 him and telling him about some of the things the helicopters did and so forth. One thing

1 led to another and Dabney admitted the fact that there wasn't a Web site like that for 881.
2 Gullledge said, "Why don't you guys put a sub Web site on my site?" So they did. Not
3 long after that Powell found it and he successfully uploaded all of his pictures of 881.
4 About eighty of them, of course these are very good pictures. He was a good
5 photographer. So I never had any pictures of the hill. Now all of a sudden here are the
6 eighty pictures of the hill and a lot of the troops, several of me. Some of me and Dabney
7 together, some of the flag-raising. It's really been a tremendous boon for all of us and
8 caused a lot of communication among us and with him. In fact one of my troops had the
9 bright idea of inviting Powell to our reunion in Charleston this year. In fact what he did
10 was he called me and said, "I know Powell is not well off. Would you be willing to pay
11 for his airfare to bring him out?" I said, "Sure." We made the offer it turns out that he is
12 just in the recovery or withdrawal stages from alcoholism and his family felt that
13 environment was not a good one to put him in right now. So he declined our offer but
14 said he's really anxious to come and he'll probably come next year so we can all get back
15 together. I've seen a couple of messages he's put on the site. He's just thrilled to death
16 that the Marines have embraced him the way they have and sort of accepted him as one
17 of them.

18 RV: What's that Web site address where the pictures are?

19 TE: The Web site address is www.hmm-364.org. If you go there, there's big
20 table of contents and there's a couple of them that involve Dave Powell. One of them is
21 just his photos and another one is just some stuff he's written. Oh no excuse me. When
22 you go to the main Web site, the Purple Foxes Web site there's a sub site called the
23 "Warriors of 881 South." You've got to click on that and then you can find the list.
24 They've got Powell and Dabney's comments all that stuff.

25 RV: What did you think of the media coverage of the war overall, then and now?

26 TE: I thought that the media coverage was I want to say biased. I recognize and
27 I've read enough now that I know that the sense that the media had, that they were being
28 lied to. There was a lot of validity to that. I think they reacted to that and it sort of
29 became a contest between them and the military and they disliked and disrespected senior
30 officers that they were being briefed by and so forth. That ended up coloring their
31 reporting. Made them more inclined to try to show up the military I think or to

1 undermine or to question what was being put out by the military. I think that was
2 destructive of morale and probably in some cases it led along with protest and actions of
3 people like Jane Fonda. I mean there's no question that it emboldened the north and gave
4 them an incentive to persevere and a way to win the war without winning it militarily.
5 General Giap and lots of others have said that in their writings. I remember my mother
6 saved a lot of the stuff. When I came back I read through all the stuff she had saved. I
7 said, "My God if I'd have known it was so bad I don't think I could have stood it." Like
8 movies it portrays—a military movie doesn't portray the real deal because it doesn't have
9 the long quiet periods of boredom and frustration. It's just one cataclysmic event after
10 another. If it really did happen that way I don't think anybody could stand it. But I think
11 they over dramatized it. It didn't portray a very real picture in my mind.

12 RV: When were you transferred away from Khe Sanh?

13 TE: The morning after the Easter attack we were helicoptered back down to the
14 combat base. The idea was that we they were going to send in fixed wing bigger planes
15 and fly us back to Quang Tri. But the enemy decided to keep throwing stuff in on the
16 airstrip so they didn't want to risk bringing the big planes in. So they staged us all
17 around the combat base in big groups in a helicopter shuttle, which took all day. While
18 we were down there at the combat base waiting for them we got some incoming and one
19 of my platoon commanders, Skip Ammon, got killed. We finally all got back to Quang
20 Tri. It was probably was on April seventeenth or eighteenth. 3rd Marine Division band
21 was waiting for us. We sort of got off the helicopters and immediately took off all of our
22 utilities. You've got to remember now these are all guys who haven't eaten hot meal,
23 haven't had a shower, haven't shaved, and haven't changed clothes in the calendar year
24 1968. It's now April. We took off these unbelievably grungy utilities, threw them in the
25 fire, went through a shower, came out the other end and got clean utilities. Went and sat
26 down and had a steak dinner. Got mail and one of my radio operators who had been
27 wounded and left the hill and never came back and was back in the States had sent me
28 two bottles of Ti Jouviet Beaujolais which I had with the wine. They were in a separate
29 little mailbag. There was a note from the postmaster in San Francisco that said that three
30 bottles had been sent, but one had broken. He forwarded the other two, and wished me
31 luck which was nice since shipping alcohol through the mail was illegal but he sent it

1 anyway. We had a great time with it. Then we all bedded down in those kinds of hard
2 backed tents I talked to you about before. We all took a deep sigh and said, “Phew, we
3 made it.” About that time, about twenty hundred for the first time in a month the NVA
4 rocketed Quang Tri with 122 mm rockets. They all landed in our battalion area and three
5 more guys got killed. Morale went from sky high to as low as it had ever been in about
6 two minutes. There was a feeling like, “It’s getting personal. These guys want us.
7 They’re going to follow us around.” So that’s how we got out of there.

8 RV: What did you do after that attack? How did you get the men together and
9 get them back up again?

10 TE: We had a lot of time to sit around and speculate while we were at Khe Sanh.
11 We were convinced at the very least they would send us back to Okinawa and refit us and
12 take care of our dental problems and our health problems and our pay problems.
13 Domestic problems and all that kind of stuff and then we’d come back as a special
14 landing force which was always a battalion on ships off shore. We thought we’d come
15 back that way. But it didn’t happen. We just came back and I think they started giving
16 us new assignments and we did them and we bitched and moaned and fussed and carried
17 on about it. We weren’t even in very good physical shape at that point. So it took us a
18 while to work us back in good physical shape because we’d been sitting around that hill
19 for three months. We just went on. I mentioned Skip Ammon’s name. That reminds me
20 of something from the hill that I forgot. We had talked about resupply and unbeknownst
21 to me Skip who was the 2nd Platoon commander had apparently in the early days of
22 February when our resupply was at it’s worst had written our letter to his mother and
23 pointed that out. His mother, being a caring mother, decided to do something about it.
24 So she contacted her congressman and wanted to know why the Marine Corps was not
25 feeding her baby properly. That resulted in a congressional inquiry letter, which I
26 received on the hill from her congressman wanting to know why I wasn’t feeding her son.
27 I was really pissed. I was very unhappy. I sat down and wrote a very long and very
28 impassioned letter, I’ve read it since and I’m sort of embarrassed by my vehemence and
29 my passion to Congressman John Rhodes who was the senior Republican in the House of
30 Representatives. I don’t think he was yet minority leader. He shortly after that became
31 the minority leader of Republicans in the House. He was the father of my college

1 roommate Jay Rhodes. He had been on my list of—he got all my letters from Vietnam. I
2 wrote this one directly to him saying, “Hey, this is a tough situation here. The Marine
3 Corps is doing the best it can. Nobody’s trying harder than the Marine Corps to try and
4 take care of us.” He ended up publishing that letter in the Congressional Record I guess
5 it is. I’ve got copies of that. I mentioned earlier that one of my college friends yesterday
6 called me and said his father died. That was Congressman Rhodes. He was an
7 outstanding American and a great human being. A big influence on my life. I said I
8 wrote to him. He wasn’t my congressman, he’s from Arizona. I thought his would be a
9 good ear to bend. So that letter is still there in the Congressional Record.

10 RV: So tell me about Quang Tri. Did you run operations out of Quang Tri or
11 were you sent elsewhere?

12 TE: Yes, we ran out of Quang Tri for a while. I remember we had security for an
13 important bridge on Route 1 just outside of Quang Tri for a while. We sort of just
14 camped around there, washed and swam in the river. We had Navy frogmen attached
15 because they were worried about them trying to blow the bridge up in the water. We ran
16 some operations out of there. That was sort of our base for three or four weeks I think. I
17 guess that would be late April or early May. So we did a bunch of those kinds of things.
18 Then sometime—let me go back. When I left Khe Sanh I was Caulfield’s assistant, the
19 S-3 Alpha. I think I told you last time about Dabney had left India Company and been
20 replaced by this captain. I told you that he came back and said that he wasn’t cut out for
21 that duty. So in late April is when I took over India Company. We went out for
22 operation. Then mid-May I believe it was, I guess it must have been early May, we got
23 orders, the whole battalion that we were being transferred to the 1st Marine Division. We
24 had been attached technically the 3rd Battalion, 26th Marines was part of the 5th Marine
25 Division, which had been activated during World War II. They were the people that
26 raised the flag at Iwo Jima. Then after the war, the 5th Marine Division was deactivated.
27 It wasn’t activated again. As a division it was never really activated. They created these
28 battalions, 1, 2 and 3 Battalion, 26th Marines and the 27th Marines for Vietnam but they
29 never activated the division itself. So we were always attached to either the 1st or the 3rd
30 Division with Marine division headquarters in Vietnam. The 3rd Division had the
31 northernmost area along the DMZ. That’s who we’d been attached with up until now.

1 Now we were being transferred to control of the 1st Marine Division, which was south of
2 the 3rd Marine Division in the area around Da Nang and to the south of Da Nang. So it
3 was a different kind of war. It was more rice paddy war although for us we ended up out
4 in the mountains most of the time. More booby traps more contact with indigenous
5 personnel. So we got this word that we're going to 1st Marine Division. So we get flown
6 to Da Nang, we get to Da Nang and we have to wait for trucks. The trucks finally get
7 there, they truck us out. I guess to regimental headquarters, headquarters of one of the
8 regiments. We get there in the middle of the afternoon, we're tired, we're feeling sort of
9 pushed around. Hurry up and wait and nobody seemed to know that we were doing.
10 Finally we get there, and about seventeen hundred we get word that my company, India
11 Company is going to be loaded on trucks and we're going out to this place called Go Noi
12 Island. There would be a guy there to lead us and tell us what's going on. So we truck
13 out there, it's about eighteen thirty now just starting to get dark. There's a major there
14 from division headquarters. He tells me that my mission is that we're on a road, right
15 next to the road to this little bridge that goes across this canal like thing. It goes out onto
16 what's called Go Noi Island, which had been used repeatedly by the NVA to rocket. It
17 was within range at the airstrip at Da Nang. They were rocketing the airstrip at Da Nang
18 so it was decided we were going to do something about it. So I said, "Okay." So the
19 major tells me I'm supposed to go across the bridge, go out onto Go Noi Island. He said
20 there were some Popular Forces out there, which were like local South Vietnam militia.
21 They had Regional Forces and Popular Forces. The Popular Forces really were just a
22 bunch of old men and kids with rifles. They were not very well trained. The Marines
23 were scared to death of them. They would just shoot at anything that moved. If you were
24 in their area and they were in your area, it was a big problem. So I said, "Has anybody
25 contacted the PFs and let them know we're coming?" They said, "No, you'll have to do
26 that." I said, "Let me get this straight. It's getting dark. You want me to take my
27 Marines out onto this piece of land that I've never seen before. You want me to contact
28 the PFs, who don't know we're coming and you want me to put in ambushes for the
29 night?" The major said, "That's it." I said, "Not going to do it." He said, "What do you
30 mean?" I said, "It's a recipe for disaster. There's no way that it can be done and be
31 done well without disastrous results so I'm not going to do it. I'll go out there first thing

1 in the morning and secure that island for you, but we're staying right here tonight." Well
2 he got apoplectic. He said, "You can't do that, Lieutenant. I'm a major!" I said, "Whose
3 idea was this?" He said, "This was General Robertson's, the division commander." I
4 said, "Okay, I'll tell you what. You go back and tell General Robertson if he really wants
5 me to do this, he should call me and tell me himself personally and he does I'll do it.
6 Otherwise I ain't going." So he got all pissed off and said, "Well you'll hear about this,"
7 and got in his jeep and roared off and we didn't go out. I did not hear anything more
8 about it until about two months later. India Company was standing by, General
9 Robertson had come up with this new idea which actually was a pretty good idea, I
10 thought, of having a company in full combat gear sitting on the helicopter landing pad at
11 all times so that reconnaissance units and others that were out in the field if they spotted
12 something and made contact we could jump in the helicopters and be there immediately.
13 We were sitting there waiting for this and the call came in that they'd spotted some NVA
14 moving along the ridge, there were some people. We jumped in the helicopter and we
15 went out there we secured the area. We captured a couple of them and we brought them
16 back. I think that was the first time that this particular tactic had yielded something. So
17 as I get off the helicopter there's a guy waiting for me and he says, "General wants to see
18 you." I jump in and I go back and General Robertson wants to debrief me. I've still got
19 my flak jacket on. I walk in and I report to him. He said, "Ah, Esslinger, I remember
20 you." He said, "You know it's a damn good thing you were right," and that's the last I
21 ever heard of that.

22 RV: So he agreed with you?

23 TE: Well it didn't take a genius to figure out that was a stupid thing to do. It sort
24 of is not what you would expect from a Marine general but he obviously was not an idiot.
25 He remembered having been a lieutenant once himself no doubt.

26 RV: Absolutely, absolutely. What other kinds of operations did you run out of
27 that area?

28 TE: Right after that I sort of thought that the 1st Division didn't know what to do
29 with us. So they came up with this new mission. Da Nang was on the coast, it was big
30 airbase there. There was a couple of miles of flat rice paddy area. Then you started fairly
31 quickly and fairly dramatically rising in to the mountains. The NVA owned those

1 mountains. They would attack Da Nang airbase from there. So they decided to do
2 something about that. So I got the orders. I think I was at Hill 55, which was a
3 regimental headquarters. It was low level land. I got orders to march out into those
4 mountains. So we mounted up and we were going to be out there for weeks. You know
5 we carried as much gear as we could and started out. I guess it's May or June and it's
6 hot. So we start climbing up over these low hills that are covered with thick elephant
7 grass, which is about six feet high. So it's probably 105 degrees outside and we're
8 moving through this thick grass. It will cut you so you have to roll your sleeves down
9 and cover everything up and if it just touches your skin it just slices it like a knife.
10 There's no air moving in there. It is very humid and very hot. We start having heat
11 problems, so we stop and we medevac some guy because the corpsman says he's in bad
12 shape. Then we move another thousand meters and it happens again so we're making
13 very little progress. Now we're starting to climb more steep inclines. So after two days
14 of this I got the officers and the non-coms together and I said, "Okay, this cannot go on
15 because we're not making any progress. Every time we stop and medevac we tell the
16 enemy where we are."

17 RV: Right.

18 TE: So I said, "Here's the deal. From now on there will be no more medevacs
19 for heat. If somebody feels bad we will stop, we will give them fifteen minutes, the
20 corpsman will treat them and then we will move on. Then if he's up to moving on with
21 us fine, if he's not two of his buddies will stay there with him until he's ready to catch up
22 with us." Nobody wanted to be left behind and nobody wanted to stay with a casualty so
23 we didn't have any more heat casualties, which I thought was great. As an aside when I
24 got back I told my buddy Rich Foley about it and he tried it with his unit. The first time
25 he tried it, he had a guy die of heat exhaustion.

26 RV: Oh, wow.

27 TE: So I guess I was just lucky. Anyway we started moving up into these
28 mountains, cutting our way. This is back when we were talking about using dogs and
29 stuff. That's about when we started doing it because we were having trouble getting in
30 this thick triple canopy with a lot of undergrowth vines. In order to make progress we
31 either had to move on trails and risk ambush or we had to move at a snail's pace by

1 literally whacking our way through it with machetes, in which case people could hear us
2 coming anyway. So we finally made it up to the first big hilltop. We got there and there
3 was this triple stand of jungle and trees, these huge teak trees and other kinds of thick
4 trees that were probably 150 feet high. They sent a helicopter out. It lowered on cables
5 through the top some chainsaws and we became a logging operation and cut down all
6 these trees and cleared a space on the top of the hill big enough for helicopters to land.
7 They came in with engineers who started blowing a bigger landing zone. The battalion
8 headquarters came in and they brought in artillery and we had a new firebase. In the
9 meantime we pushed off to the west and did it again. Climbed to a higher one. We did
10 this probably eight, nine times. India Company was almost always in the lead, troops
11 bitching and moaning. Then at one point the colonel decided to give us a break and send
12 Mike Company I think it was out. Then the troops say, "What's going on? What did we
13 do wrong? Why is he mad at us?" So we did that and we did it fairly well and it was
14 pretty effective. That was the operation on which we finally got over the top of the
15 highest mountain and down the other side. On the reverse slope found that regimental
16 artillery headquarters I talked about. I don't think I told you about another event there
17 that was memorable. After we'd done this four or five times we had cleared this one
18 landing zone and we'd gotten this down to a pretty efficient operation. As soon as they
19 were able to start landing helicopters the engineers would expand the landing zone. Then
20 more helicopters would come in, they'd bring in the artillery, bring in a lot of
21 ammunition. So on this particular hill we had done the usual thing. As we cut a small
22 clearing my troops had manned positions around the landing zone. Then as the landing
23 zone expanded and more and more troops came in I moved my troops further down the
24 hill away from the landing zone because they needed more room for everything that was
25 coming in. So it's again about dusk, and one of the last helicopters was coming in and
26 it's carrying a load of troops. By now the landing zone is chock full of cases of food and
27 ammo, about chest high. So the helicopter is actually going to land on top off all this
28 stuff and discharge these troops. They sort of would dip down below the level of the hill
29 and then climb into the hill sort of to give them a little more purchase. As he was doing
30 this, this helicopter pilot sort of lost his way a little bit and he started sliding to port. As
31 he did so one of the blades came into contact with one of the big trees, caused it to fly off

1 and go whizzing across the landing zone. It hit a Marine's mid section and cut him in
2 half. Then the helicopter crashed, came crashing down on top of all this stuff and
3 immediately started smoking. It just so happened I'd come back up from my company
4 because the battalion commander was there and he called a meeting of the company
5 commanders, so we were all there, meeting just off the landing zone. We heard this crash
6 and came running to the landing zone and there's this helicopter and a couple guys are
7 streaming out of it. The helicopter is smoking. It's sitting right on top of cases and cases
8 of .81mm and 105 artillery ammo. This is a bad situation. So one of the majors stopped
9 one of the troops coming out of the helicopter. He said, "Is everybody off?" He said,
10 "No, I think there are a couple of guys that are trapped on there, knocked out or
11 something." The major says, "We've got to go get these guys." I'm thinking, "Who's
12 we? I don't want to go into that helicopter." But the major and I jump up and we get into
13 the helicopter. By now there's a small fire in the tail. These things are metal; once they
14 caught fire it went fast. Plus we knew there was plenty of fuel on board this thing and we
15 knew we were sitting on top of high explosives. There were a couple guys who were
16 strapped into seats and they were either groggy or knocked out. So we got our knives,
17 cut them loose, got them to the door, threw them out and went back and got the other
18 ones. A couple of the other guys grabbed them and then we jumped off that thing and
19 dove off the landing zone. Just as we did the damn helicopter blew up. It started cooking
20 off these rounds. Boy, that landing zone basically caught fire. All night these rounds
21 would cook off. Guys back at Da Nang said they could see it was like fireworks when
22 these white phosphorous rounds would catch fire and go arching over the mountain.
23 Finally after my adrenaline high drained high had itself and I got control of myself a
24 couple hours later I got back down to my company. One of the troops took me to the side
25 and said, "Sir, that helicopter crashed right where my hole was last night. Moving us
26 down here was the smartest thing you ever did." Because you know they were perfectly
27 protected down there away from all the madness.

28 RV: Right, wow.

29 TE: So that was what we were doing. We spent I'd say the better part of May
30 and June doing those kinds of operations.

31 RV: Did you have any enemy contact?

1 TE: Occasional. The dog would sniff out ambushes. We would either out flank
2 them or call in our supporting arms if it was where we could do that. We had the contact
3 when we found that regimental artillery headquarters although I think it was mostly just a
4 rear guard while all the rest of them left. We had obviously surprised them and when we
5 got there, there was still food cooking and stuff like that.

6 RV: Was this when you were working with the Chieu Hoi?

7 TE: Working with the Chieu Hoi and with dogs.

8 RV: Tell me about the Chieu Hoi experience. How well could you trust this guy?

9 TE: Well, initially you have a lot of reservations. But I don't remember. I never
10 did learn exactly what they were, but I did learn later that there were incentives, and
11 disincentives that these guys had been given. What I would do, I always made him go
12 first. One of the things these guys were good at was spotting the signs. The NVA would
13 leave signs marking booby traps and sometimes even ambushes. Of course he knew how
14 to recognize them and we didn't. So he'd tell me what he thought was happening and I'd
15 say, "Fine. Go out there and see if you're right." Over a period of time—they would
16 change periodically. I had one that I had for a while that I actually became pretty good
17 friends with. He liked the fact that I could speak a little Vietnamese to him and we got
18 along pretty well. Actually became fairly friendly and I developed a lot of confidence in
19 him. But I was always cognizant in the fact that you just really couldn't tell who you
20 could trust over there. I mean I remember when we were at Evans we had locals from the
21 village come in everyday and they would cut your hair and do your laundry and all that
22 kind of stuff. I always wondered about that, sitting there in the chair and having this
23 funny looking little yellow guy with a straight razor working on you didn't seem to be a
24 good idea. I figured, "Well, he's not going to slit my throat in here." I was a little
25 nervous about that. So I always had a little bit of skepticism about the loyalties of any of
26 them frankly. That was all part of my, "They're different, they're not us," kind of thing.

27 RV: Now you're approaching your day to leave. You're going to leave in
28 October and you're getting a few months away. How much were you cognizant of this
29 fact?

30 TE: At this point, not yet. I wasn't cognizant at all. I was cognizant of the fact
31 that I hadn't been on R&R. I had planned to go to R&R in March. I was going to go to

1 Hawaii and meet my girlfriend. But of course I was on that hill then that just wasn't
2 possible. So I didn't do it. Then I thought, "Well after we get off, I'll go." Then before I
3 had a chance to schedule it in April I got India Company. That was by far the most
4 rewarding period of my tour. I mean I loved being a Marine infantry company
5 commander in Vietnam. I mean I just felt challenged and fulfilled everyday. I had
6 developed a strong bond with these troops; I felt like they were mine. I was responsible
7 for them. It was up to me to get them home. The idea of turning them over to somebody
8 else seemed like betrayal or treason or something. As far as I was concerned I was going
9 to do it for the rest of my tour. After we got done doing mountain stuff then we were
10 operating southwest of Da Nang sort of what they called the Que Son Valley, and Happy
11 Valley. There were sort of big broad valleys down there. There was plenty of Viet Cong
12 activity there. We were—for a while when we were operating there we were running
13 patrols, running ambushes and we weren't getting much contact. Somebody, I don't
14 remember who it was, I don't think it was my idea. Somebody came up with the idea and
15 we were the first company to implement it with great success what we called killer teams.
16 We would send a platoon patrol through an area and we would just drop off four guys.
17 So unless somebody was really close and really being careful they wouldn't notice it.
18 These guys would just drop off into the brush somewhere. Then they'd sit there until
19 nightfall or as long as it took. We started triggering successful ambushes on one or two
20 or five Cong moving from place to place or doing whatever they were doing. I think we
21 did that for about a month, most of July. We never even had a Marine wounded. I think
22 we ended up with something like forty-five [enemy] KIA or something like that.

23 RV: Very effective.

24 TE: Very effective and much more effective than tactics anybody else would
25 have. That started spreading through our battalion and through the division frankly and
26 was a very effective tactic. It was very hard for the Viet Cong to counter. Then it got
27 toward the end of July and the powers that be, the colonel and Caulfield decided that I'd
28 pushed the envelope enough. It was time to bring me out of the field and give somebody
29 else a chance. So this guy Foley that I've mentioned I met him at the Defense Language
30 Institute West Coast studying Vietnamese before we came. He was the guy I played golf
31 with. When we got to Vietnam we got there a couple days apart. We were both assigned

1 to India Company. We were both 3/26 both to India Company. Initially he was the 3rd
2 Platoon commander; I was the 2nd Platoon commander. Then I became XO and then after
3 I left, he became XO. When I came back to India Company he was very disappointed
4 because he thought he was going to get India Company. But they made him the battalion
5 intelligence officer and promised him he would get his chance. So they finally decided
6 then of course he was India Company the whole way. They told me they scheduled me
7 for R&R and when I left Foley was going to take over India Company. That was like the
8 last couple days of July. I went to Sydney. I chose Sydney because by that time as I put
9 it, I was real tired of little people with slanted eyes and just wanted to see round eye
10 people. So I went to Sydney and that was great except that I went in my summer
11 uniform, summer khakis, short sleeves. We landed at six AM and it was thirty-two
12 degrees outside. It was the coldest temperature that had ever been registered in Sydney.
13 But it warmed up pretty quickly. They had a great system set up to get you some clothes
14 and get you a hotel. I really don't remember it very much. I remember the people being
15 very nice. I remember being invited to somebody's home for dinner. But mostly I think
16 I took a shower about every three hours. I think it was probably three days before that
17 red dirt stopped coming off. I enjoyed it very much and I came back.

18 RV: Were you by yourself or did you have somebody with you?

19 TE: Yeah, I stayed by myself. There were other guys staying in the hotel who
20 were on R&R but nobody I knew. I met them and we had dinner together and go places
21 together and stuff like that. I remember I played golf there right on the coast. There was
22 a beautiful golf course. I bought a pair of golf shoes I wore that one time and never since
23 then. Gave them away to a friend recently.

24 RV: Was it weird playing golf? You'd just been in combat.

25 TE: The whole thing was weird. In a lot of ways I think R&R was good, but in a
26 lot of ways you sort of put real life on hold. Troops would think about the world as we
27 called it and what people were doing. You sort of lost track of the fact that the rest of the
28 world was just living its life normally. I'm not so sure it was a good idea half way
29 through to remind people that the rest of the world's life was going on. Most of the
30 world didn't give a shit one way or the other what we did or didn't do, whether we lived

1 or died. I don't think that was necessarily good for morale. I guess the two balanced out
2 probably.

3 RV: How did it affect you personally?

4 TE: I think it was good for me in the sense of giving me a chance. I did a lot of
5 sleeping. I think I just got rested up. The whole time I was in Vietnam I had always been
6 susceptible to colds. I'm an asthmatic, I didn't tell them that. That's how I got in, and
7 that bothered me sometimes. I had some form of diarrhea most of the time so I never
8 really felt very good, plus I was always dead tired. So then the best thing about it for me
9 was it just gave me the chance to recover physically a little bit. Then I went back and
10 became the systems operations officer. Reminded me of my bunker assignment. I really
11 enjoyed working with Caulfield. He was an outstanding Marine officer. That's what I
12 did for the rest of the time. Shortly after that we got a new battalion commander. I
13 remember I got told—sometime in August I guess we were sent to an area called Phu Gia
14 Pass. It was just north of the village of Lang Co. That was just north of the Hai Van
15 Pass. The Hai Van Pass was just north of Da Nang. Those mountains that were west of
16 Da Nang jutted out right to the coast. In order to get from Da Nang Route 1 had to climb
17 over that mountain range. The pass was called Hai Van Pass. Route 1 switch backed
18 dozens of times up that mountain and across sit and down the other side. Of course that
19 was one of the most vulnerable points for Route 1. The NVA could come through the
20 mountains and jungle right up to the edge of the road and so it was ambushed a lot. We
21 had a battalion dedicated to keeping Route 1 open across there because that was the only
22 supply line from Da Nang to the rest of the northern provinces and we drew that duty. So
23 the battalion headquarters was put on the side of this mountain overlooking this lagoon.
24 It was an absolutely lovely spot. In fact subsequently when I was back in 1998, I saw a
25 mock up this Japanese company was spending five hundred million dollars building their
26 resort there and tunneling through the mountain. When I was back this last time that
27 hadn't begun their resort yet, but the tunnel was almost finished. We had troops stationed
28 all along Route 1, all across the Hai Van Pass. Fire teams every seventy-five or a
29 hundred yards. They lived up there and guarded it and secured it basically. So that's
30 what we were doing. I was at the battalion headquarters and I got word one day Major
31 Caulfield told me to get in the jeep and go up Route 1 to Dong Ha, it might have been

1 Quang Tri and a new battalion commander was coming in. So I got in the jeep and got a
2 rifleman and the two of us ran up Route 1 and waited for him. He came in and we picked
3 him up. On the way back we briefed him. I still stay in touch with him. His name was
4 JWP Robertson; he was a piece of work. He was a first family of Virginia Robertsons.
5 He went to VMI (Virginia Military Institute). Very outgoing, personable, fun loving kind
6 of guy. He tells everybody he's ever met since then his first experience in Vietnam,
7 when he got off the helicopter and saw this totally squared away lieutenant with his flak
8 jacket buttoned and his helmet buckled, what a professional job I did of greeting him and
9 briefing him and so forth, and what a positive spin I gave him on the battalion and how
10 much he knew about the battalion before he even got there and so forth. So I became sort
11 of his pet. He liked to play bridge. He would include me in his bridge games in the
12 evenings. Did all kind of crazy things. One time he asked me to fly with him and we got
13 a helicopter and we flew out to one of the hospital ships that was off the coast of
14 Vietnam, either the *Sanctuary* or the *Repose*. Chatted up the nurses. The next thing you
15 know he invites the nurses to come to dinner with us. So he sets this up and he sends me
16 in a helicopter out to the hospital ship. I pick up six nurses and bring them back and land
17 them at Phu Gia Pass. They have a meal with us and they go around and greet the troops.

18 RV: You guys are heroes.

19 TE: Craziness. Then one of the officers, probably Caulfield or somebody, was
20 leaving and he decided he wanted to have a mess night. So he made me in charge of the
21 mess night. So that prevailed and everybody scrounged booze and steaks and stuff. We
22 had this facsimile of a Marine officers mess night right there on the hill at Phu Gia Pass.
23 So that's the way I spent the rest of my time. I remember in September that part of the
24 coast got hit by a vicious typhoon. It just blew everything away. Just went on for days,
25 three days I think. I ended up spending that day; there was a little hole in the group, a
26 bunker basically. I ended up sharing that hole with Father Hannigan, the battalion
27 chaplain who I got to know very well. I was in there seventy-two hours with him and
28 couldn't come out. Just as an ironic aside, after I came back I was at 8th and I
29 Washington and I decided to get married, shortly before I got married Father Hannigan
30 got assigned as the chaplain of the Navy yard and he married us. So that's one of the
31 things I remember from that period of time. By now I was getting pretty short. Just

1 looking to see whether there's anything else that happened during that period of time. I
2 do remember I told you I liked to attend Caulfield's briefings of the new troops. We had
3 a very good view. We were sort of on the side of the hill and I looked over this lagoon
4 and down the coast. It was a gorgeous spot. I would listen to Caulfield brief these guys
5 sit up there and do that. Then the chaplain, Father Hannigan would brief them. I
6 remember one of the things he would do is there was dump down off Route 1, well down
7 below us but you could see it from our spot. Of course a lot of our trash was in there. At
8 any given time if you looked down there, you could see a bunch of Vietnamese kids
9 prowling around in the dump looking for stuff. So he was talking to these kids about
10 resisting the temptations that might present themselves in Vietnam. The way he sort of
11 drew the exclamation point was to say, "Would you really like to leave here and leave
12 some of your kids down there?" I think he got the message across to the kids pretty well.
13 So that's really the way I spent my last couple of months there. I think it was October
14 fourth, fifth, something like that was our rotation date. Foley was three days behind
15 mine. My mother somehow knew Foley's mother. He lived in New Jersey I guess we
16 had given each other our mothers' addresses. I guess I was sending my dear friends
17 letters, my mother was sending to Mrs. Foley. Mrs. Foley was a real worrywart. She was
18 convinced everyday that this was going to be the day. She would call my mother
19 everyday. She'd hear about an action up in the DMZ and she was convinced we were
20 there. There would be one down in the Mekong Delta the next day and she was
21 convinced we were there. She was driving my mother crazy. I always had a sort of
22 paternalistic feeling toward Foley. Foley was a brilliant guy but he just managed to
23 screw things up. I mean he got kicked out of college running this gambling operation.
24 He'd broken his arm at the end of basic school so the whole time we were at Monterey
25 his arm was healing. I just felt like he needed supervision or help. So I decided I was
26 going to hang around for the next three days to take him along home and make sure he
27 got home, so I did. He tells the story very well of how he was still company commander
28 of India Company and I sent him out on an operation. In fact I think it just extended past
29 his rotation date and so I waited. He finally got back in and he was pissed off because he
30 had the same proprietary feeling toward India Company that I did and he did not approve
31 of the officer they had selected to take over India Company from him. He was telling the

1 colonel he wasn't leaving. So finally the colonel convinced him that this guy would only
2 be in charge of India Company for a couple days until this new captain arrived and so
3 forth. So Foley said, "Okay." So one morning the colonel came and got me and said,
4 "You guys are going home." He got in the jeep with me and Foley and I drove over and
5 he said to Foley, "Get in the jeep," and he drove us over Hai Van Pass to Da Nang. He
6 had some friend down there, a senior officer in the air wing and he prevailed upon him to
7 turn over his quarters to me and Foley for our last night in Vietnam and he did. So we
8 got on the big bird and went home.

9 RV: What day was this?

10 TE: I think it was like October tenth, eleventh, something like that.

11 RV: How many days past your date had you stayed?

12 TE: About a week and a half, which really pissed off my girlfriend. She hasn't
13 gotten over it to this day. I exacerbated that further when we arrived at the Air Force
14 base near Los Angeles. I had been sort of adopted during my tour over there by this
15 family. I don't believe I told you about them. There was this immigrant family names
16 was, Kaspaul, K-a-s-p-a-u-l. They were from somewhere in Eastern Europe. They had a
17 son who was in the Marine Corps, he was a sergeant and he was killed in Vietnam. Mr.
18 Kaspaul, I don't know exactly what he did. He was well to do. He had a thriving
19 business in southern California. For reasons that I can't figure out, but obviously made
20 sense to them the Kaspaul family they had been very active in sending great care
21 packages to their son. All kinds of great stuff in addition to the usual food. I mean
22 they'd find pens that had lights on them so you could write at night, just all kinds of
23 gizmos like that. They kept sending them to some of his friends after he died. One thing
24 led to another and pretty soon they had a mailing list of ten or twenty Marines that they
25 would send these packages to and write letters and exchange correspondence with.
26 Somehow or other I got on that list. I don't remember how. When they knew I was
27 coming back they invited me to visit with them for a day. So I certainly felt I owed that
28 to them and I did. They announced they were going to take us to Disneyland. I thought,
29 "Wow. Just what I need." But actually it was great. It couldn't have been better. We
30 had a day or two at Okinawa to sort of decompress then we were landing in the world.
31 Going and spending a day at Disneyland was actually a very good idea. Disneyland was

1 very clean, run beautifully. Everybody was pleasant. Everybody treated us great. It
2 really was sort an uplifting way of being reintroduced into American society. One of the
3 twelve Marine officers who had been together at language school, Foley was one of them
4 and Foley and I were together. One of the other ones, Watts Humphrey, who had been in
5 a class behind me at Yale, was the most seriously injured of the twelve of us. I think I
6 told you that none of us ever got killed. He was the one that caught the RPG in the right
7 forearm. He was in the hospital at Camp Pendleton, so we drove down there to visit him.
8 So we'd been back in country two or three days before we caught our plane home. So we
9 told our parents that we would arrive in Philadelphia aboard flight so-and-so at sixteen
10 hundred or whatever I think it was probably October fourteenth. So we get up that
11 morning and we're getting ready to go to the airport and Foley needs breakfast. We're at
12 the airport and Foley says, "I've got to have breakfast." I said, "Come on you're going to
13 miss the plane." "Don't worry they won't leave without us." Well they did. By the time
14 we got to the gate, they closed the door, so we missed our flight. So we had to call home
15 and say, "We missed our flight." So we caught a later flight. By the time we got in at the
16 airport nobody was in a particularly good mood. They were pissed. My girlfriend was
17 pissed first of all that I had stayed in Vietnam the extra days. She was pissed that we
18 spent some time in Los Angeles. She was pissed that we'd missed the plane. She was
19 mad—she had visions of me sneaking back into country and having a romantic tryst with
20 her before my parents even knew I was there. Instead I called my parents and told them
21 to call her and she was supposed to come with them to meet me and that made her mad.
22 Then I got off the plane and I was a lot lighter, a lot thinner than I had been. We had
23 stopped over for a couple of hours in Japan on the way home and I'd made a point of
24 getting the ribbons I knew I deserved and putting them on my uniform. I had cultivated
25 this sort of pencil-lined Errol Flynn mustache which I thought made me look very
26 dashing, she hated it. So it was not a very uplifting experience for me, either the greeting
27 or the ride home. It took us a long time to sort of get over all that.

28 RV: Did you two end up getting married?

29 TE: Yeah.

30 RV: Did you have any incidents in any of the airports? Any problems coming
31 home?

1 TE: No incidents at the airport. She was I believe a junior at Vassar. During my
2 thirty day leave I decided to drive up there. So I put on my uniform and all my ribbons
3 and stuff and went up there. That was a mistake.

4 RV: What happened?

5 TE: It wasn't anything particularly dramatic but it became very apparent, very
6 quickly that I was not welcome. Just in subtle but obvious ways. So I knew better than
7 to do that again and I didn't. I went up to Yale to attend a couple football games. Saw
8 people I'd known before either professors or in some cases students. Conversation with
9 them was awkward. It wasn't hostile, but it was awkward.

10 RV: Were you in uniform?

11 TE: No, I'd learned my lesson. But you know, I was an exception. There were
12 like eight hundred guys that graduated in my class, obviously all of whom were obvious
13 candidates for cannon fodder. I think maybe a dozen of us went. There was one guy in
14 my class that was killed. The rest of them I don't think understood why I would go, why
15 I would join or approved of the whole thing. One of the things I never did understand,
16 still don't was why the protestors—protesting the war and protesting the decisions made
17 in Washington and even protesting the conduct of the war by the generals I can
18 understand. But why they took it out on the troops, I don't understand. We were just
19 guys who did what we were supposed to do, what our country told us to do. This baby
20 killer stuff and some of the other incidents I've heard about from other people made no
21 sense to me then and makes no sense to me now.

22 RV: Do you think the civilian population learned its lesson from that incident?

23 TE: That's a good question. I certainly observed very different treatment that the
24 Gulf War people received and that the military receives now. I guess on a deep level I
25 sort of resent it. But I'm so pleased to see the military being accepted and received and
26 appreciated by the populous in general as well as it is now that far overshadows any
27 minor resentment I might feel. I was peripherally active in helping to get the Wall built
28 and I was there for the dedication in 1982 and took part in the parade. I was absolutely
29 infuriated by the press coverage that said this was the country's welcome home we never
30 had. That was total bullshit. We raised the money from ourselves. We built the damn
31 thing and we put the parade on for ourselves. It wasn't the county welcoming us; it was

1 us welcoming each other, which is why to this day whenever at a reunion or the Wall or
2 anywhere else one of us sees another identifiable Vietnam vet we say, "Welcome home."

3 RV: How many times have you been to the memorial in Washington?

4 TE: Countless.

5 RV: What have been your experiences?

6 TE: It's an amazing place. The way, in which I was involved, you'll recall. Very
7 active protests revolved around Ross Perot against the design. I still don't understand
8 how a female undergraduate at Yale could come up with that design. As I often do with
9 many works of art you see things in them and you wonder whether the artists put it there,
10 or did the artist know what they were doing. I find it hard to believe that she could have
11 conceptualized the profound effect this thing would have. But obviously she just did a
12 great design. It was resisted by the veterans because they said every other monument in
13 the capital is white and soaring. This is black and it's underground. They called it the
14 black ditch of shame. So there was a fairly significant political and emotional battle
15 fought over that. Eventually the compromise was to put the statue of the three soldiers
16 and it got built. I think it's spectacular for one. I've been there dozens, maybe hundreds
17 of times. I've been there at every hour in the day or night in every kind of weather and I
18 have never been alone. There is always someone there. In the eighties and nineties the
19 identifiable Vietnam veterans were the ones that wore the camouflage and ponytails and
20 everything else. Some of them more or less established a base or outpost that was always
21 manned. That's not true anymore because the park service finally kicked them out.
22 There's always somebody there. I've been there at three o'clock in the morning in a
23 driving snowstorm and there's somebody else there. It's very important for me. I make
24 a point of going there on Memorial Day and different stuff. I make a point of going there
25 on January twentieth every year. In between occasionally I'll take some visitor or
26 somebody. But most of the time I go by myself. My office is only about less than a half
27 mile from it. If I'm having a bad day, I'll just walk over there. If the pressures of life,
28 the stresses, the strains of life build up on me. I'll just go over there and sit there. My
29 favorite time to do it is at night. Over where the statues are there's a path that runs
30 behind there and some benches and I'll just go sit on those benches where you can see the
31 Wall. I don't know why it helps me but it does. I think what it does it helps to restore

1 my perspective. Whatever is going on that's concerning me or bothering me now, almost
2 invariably it pales in significance compared to the pressures and responsibilities I had
3 then. There is some way that I can't really explain. I feel the responsibility I guess to the
4 guys who didn't make it and whose names are on the Wall to not forget them. I vowed
5 that I wouldn't. One device I did which had been very successful was in order to make
6 sure that I thought about them periodically, most times I don't have trouble with that. I
7 think about them everyday. Sometimes time will go by. But one of the things I decided
8 was that every time I hear the National Anthem playing I will think about each one of
9 them individually. I do that and that's been very successful in helping me feel like I stay
10 in touch with them. You know I've thought a lot about this. I don't think that what I
11 have is survivor's guilt, because I don't feel guilty about surviving. At least I don't think
12 so, at least not consciously. But I don't know there's just some feeling of loss. I think of
13 Mike Thomas. I knew him very well. He was just an outstanding person, just full of life
14 and fun. I think of what a great father he would have made, what great kids he would
15 have had. You know you feel like something very important, something very valuable is
16 lost. I spent after about ten years. I really didn't think much about the war and didn't
17 talk much about it, really until the Wall. Somehow the Wall and the experience and the
18 dedication ceremony and everything else sort of put me back in touch with all of this. I
19 guess I was ready then. So it's been very different since then. About that time I had
20 promised myself that I would get in touch with Mike's parents and tell them about him
21 and the way he died. So I sat down and started writing it but I never could finish it.

22 RV: Did you ever go talk to them?

23 TE: No, but when I started writing it I knew he was from Pawnee, Oklahoma. So
24 my wife decided to put me in touch with his parents. So she wrote a letter to the high
25 school principal and to the postmaster of Pawnee asking them if they knew Mike
26 Thomas's parents and if they were still alive. Well, it turns out Mike Thomas's father is
27 the postmaster. So he wrote back and gave me the address and everything. Actually
28 through that we ended up getting in touch with his brother. His brother has actually
29 attended some of our Khe Sanh veterans' reunions.

30 RV: Really?

1 TE: It's not unusual. At the reunions there are always some family members of
2 guys who died. So she told him that I was going to write this letter and send it to him.
3 Which of course I didn't get finished and didn't get finished. He told her to make sure to
4 send it to him at the post office and not to send it to his home because Mike's mother has
5 never accepted the fact that Mike's dead. She still thinks somehow or another he's
6 wandering around the jungles over there and someday he's going to come home. I guess
7 they prevailed on her not to open the casket because he got shot right in the forehead with
8 a .50 caliber machine gun, which basically blew his head apart. She has not quite totally
9 accepted that was Mike in there. He didn't want to awaken ghosts. So finally I don't
10 remember exactly when. It was a couple years ago. Maybe it was after I went back. I
11 did finish the letter and I did send it to him.

12 RV: Did you hear back from him?

13 TE: I never actually talked to him directly. He sent a thank you letter after I sent
14 him clipping of Mike's funeral and stuff like that.

15 RV: But you've been in contact with his brother or you've seen his brother at the
16 reunions?

17 TE: Yes I'm not much of a correspondant, my wife does the corresponding, but
18 yes I saw him at a reunion. He actually looks a lot like Mike. The Wall has been very
19 important for me.

20 RV: It sounds like it.

21 TE: I sort of again feel almost a proprietary interest. I sort of feel like it's my
22 Wall.

23 RV: What do you think was the most significant thing that you learned from your
24 tour in Vietnam?

25 TE: Well, the experience clearly made me a better person. My wife knew me
26 before and she knows me now. She bears witness to the fact that I grew up, I matured. I
27 became more comfortable with myself and who I am. I became easier to be around.

28 RV: That's interesting because you hear some veterans say that the opposite
29 happened to them. Why was it different for you?

1 TE: I don't know. I've been concerned over the years of the image of the
2 Vietnam vet, all this PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) and drunkenness and crime
3 and everything else. Are you aware of the book, *Stolen Valor*?

4 RV: Yes, sir.

5 TE: That was a really welcome book for me and a lot of them, my family. I
6 always felt like the image of the Vietnam vet was way overdone. The research that they
7 did and the numbers that they gave and the anecdotes that they told and all that sort of
8 thing made me feel that my gut impression was right. A lot of the bad press and PR
9 (public relations) the Vietnam vet has gotten wasn't deserved and wasn't accurate. But I
10 don't know exactly why. I think most Vietnam veterans adjusted very well. Sure, there
11 are always going to be some people who have a little more adverse reaction but that's
12 been true in any war. Why some react better than others I don't know. Now it's
13 interesting to me at every reunion I've been to there's always been a presentation or a
14 seminar or whatever on PTSD. I've never gone to any of them. My feeling has always
15 been that that's for those weak people. But this last one because one of the guys I knew
16 wanted to go and was going and I didn't have anything else to do, I went. I was really
17 very much impressed and amazed. They had three guys there who stood up and talked
18 about their experience. The way they presented themselves and they had the same kind
19 of attitude towards this whole thing as I did. "That couldn't be me. I'm too strong for
20 that." They described themselves and the thought processes that they went through and
21 their experiences. For most of them there was an emotional deterioration that led often to
22 a particular event that made them realize that they needed help. They went and got help.
23 The message they were trying to give us, was remember this is to a group a meeting of
24 the Khe Sanh veterans' reunion. They said, "If you were at Khe Sanh, and you don't
25 think you have PTSD you're wrong. It's just a question of how severe and how it has
26 affected you." The message they were trying to get across was that there's help out there
27 for it. One of them said, "I put the presentation on at a reunion in which most of the guys
28 had their wives there." There were actually quite a few wives at this one. They said,
29 "What we did was put the veterans on chairs in the first row and they put their wives
30 behind them. Then we started describing some of the symptoms and behaviors typical of
31 PTSD." He said, "As we ticked off each one all the vets in the front row were shaking

1 their head no and all the wives behind them were shaking their head yes.” They said, “If
2 you don’t think you have PTSD ask your wife.” My wife’s been trying to convince me
3 for years I could benefit from facing up to some of this. So I’m actually toying with the
4 idea of exploring that. I haven’t quite gotten there yet.

5 RV: So you don’t believe that you have suffered from any kind of PTSD?

6 TE: Well it certainly has not incapacitated me in any realistic way. I think it has,
7 if it has affected me and I think maybe it has it’s in my inner personal relationships. I just
8 never really related that to the war or to PTSD. I thought that was just me. I am who I
9 am. I’m kind of an iconoclast and I’m a loner. I don’t value insignificant and social
10 human interactions very much so I don’t engage in them. I didn’t think that meant there
11 was anything wrong with me I just thought that was part of me. After listening to these
12 guys I recognize some of my idiosyncrasies and behaviors and some of the things they
13 were talking about. They say, “If you walk into a bar it’s that guy down there at the end
14 of the bar by himself drinking his beer.” I’m the kind of guy if I go to a bar—I hate
15 going to cocktail parties. I’ve got no time for making small talk with people I don’t
16 know. I don’t care what they think about the weather. So maybe some of that is part of
17 the residual effects of that experience. It’s almost hard to believe that you could have
18 that kind of an experience and not have some residual effects or sort of wonder why it
19 didn’t bother me more. Now of course as you can tell from when I was talking a while
20 ago, talking about it, thinking about it, reading articles about the Wall or something,
21 moves me to tears. Of course I’m the kind of guy until like twenty years ago I hated to
22 cry because I was a child and strong guys don’t do that. Sort of matured and grown over
23 that. Part of that was I proved I was a tough guy in Vietnam. I proved it to myself and
24 everybody else I don’t have anything to prove in that regard anymore. When I started
25 having to wear reading glasses and I kept losing them all the time, I finally got myself a
26 granny sting and hung them around my neck. Everywhere I go I figure, “Who’s going to
27 make fun of me for that?”

28 RV: Right. “I commanded a company in Vietnam.”

29 TE: Right. That’s the main thing. I don’t know whether you call that learning. I
30 learned something about myself. It’s the main residual effect of my experience. I
31 learned a lot and you heard me talk earlier about the resilience in human beings. I’m

1 convinced in human beings if they are motivated to do so if they are survivors and want
2 to survive, they can survive virtually anything. It wasn't that long ago we heard about
3 this guy I don't remember what the hell happened to him. But the one who cut off his leg
4 to free himself from a rock something like a mountain climber.

5 RV: Cut off his arm.

6 TE: Arm, yeah. Most people think, "God, I couldn't do that." Well, I didn't
7 think I could withstand seventy-seven days at Khe Sanh. But I did. I've talked about
8 Vietnam. I've always carried a grudge if you will with respect to my college classmates.
9 I was in law school when the Calley trial was going on. I wrote an impassioned letter to
10 the school newspaper in which I pointed out that first of all, all the people who are
11 screaming for Calley's head weren't there. They didn't experience the incredible
12 frustration of watching your troops get blown away by booby traps and having nobody to
13 retaliate against and knowing that the person who did it is over there at that village.
14 Every one of us wanted to go over there and torch that village but the leaders wouldn't
15 permit it. I wanted to do it too, but I knew we couldn't. I knew it was wrong and I
16 couldn't let my troops do it. They knew that. Calley clearly wasn't strong enough to do
17 that. Calley shouldn't have been a lieutenant. If all my classmates at Yale and the ones
18 at Princeton and Harvard had joined the service and become the officers they should have
19 been Calley would have been a corporal. They would have helped in telling him what to
20 do and that wouldn't have occurred. Those were the guys that were screaming the
21 loudest for his scalp. I sort of pointed that out. In the interim at reunions at Yale I've
22 unburdened myself of that opinion occasionally. The last two times we've gotten
23 together actually we've had discussions on Vietnam, which were first of all much better
24 attended than I thought they would be. The interchange was interesting and valuable. I
25 certainly felt then and feel now. In fact I said to my wife, I said, "Most of these guys
26 thirty or forty years from now are going to be ashamed because they were raised in the
27 same country I was." They were raised with basically the same values as I was. The
28 reason I didn't use my asthma or blood pressure or any of the other things that would
29 have kept me out physically it would have been damaging to my psyche to be 4-F. I
30 didn't want to think of myself as too delicate to go or something. So I not only didn't
31 think something up I avoided telling them about things I knew would keep me out. I just

1 truly believed and I still do and the events have borne me out in many cases that those
2 guys at some point in the dark of the morning would take counsel with themselves and be
3 ashamed of the extent to which they went or the fact that they didn't volunteer to go. It
4 denied the military their talent and skills, which would have been very valuable.

5 RV: Do you think that has happened?

6 TE: Yes, I know it has for some of them. The best expression of it I've seen is by
7 Pat Conroy. You know who he is?

8 RV: Yes, the author. I know him very well.

9 TE: The guy who wrote *The Great Santini*?

10 RV: Yes, I know him very well.

11 TE: He wrote an essay or an article or something that was passed around the
12 internet or something a few years ago.

13 RV: From the death of his father?

14 TE: Yes. Was there a separate one in which he was writing a book about the
15 Citadel basketball team?

16 RV: That's his most recent book, *My Losing Season*.

17 TE: He went around and the article I'm talking about, now I remember it was
18 very moving. I think this one was he went around and one of the guys that was on the
19 basketball team that he interviewed had been to Vietnam and got them into this thing.
20 Conroy then wrote this sort of reflective piece in which he sort of came to grips with his
21 relationship with his father. His avoidance of service in Vietnam and then the interplay
22 with this other fellow basketball player, which was exactly the kind of reaction that I had
23 predicted and I thought was a very eloquent expression. He was obviously a very
24 talented writer. I mean I've had some of these people say that. You know what got me
25 started in that was in each one of these interchanges at the Yale reunions if people would
26 speak and rebut if you will, points I've made. They would almost invariably begin by
27 saying, "You know Tom I couldn't have done what you did, but." After a while I got
28 tired of hearing that and I stopped them and I said, "I'm tired of hearing that." I said,
29 "You could have done it and you would have done it because what choice did you have?
30 What was I going to do? I couldn't run away. I could have shot myself, but that's the
31 only alternative." The reason they react and accomplish and do things that they don't

1 think they could have is because they don't have any choice. They've got to. The human
2 mechanism and the human mind are amazingly adaptive.

3 RV: Tell me about going back to Vietnam. Why did you go back initially?

4 TE: I sort of toyed with the idea I told you before about the unsatisfactory state of
5 my attitude towards it and its people. That always bothered me when I left. That always
6 bothered me because Mike Thomas and these guys had died for trying to make a better
7 life for these people. I guess really we were doing it to stop communism for our own
8 benefit. While you were there, you sort of felt like you were trying to protect these
9 people from a bunch of bad guys and make a better life for them so having a very
10 negative feeling toward them as a whole didn't seem right. It didn't fit and bothered me.
11 Then as I met some of them over here and sort of started overcoming that at least on an
12 individual basis I thought that I might be worthwhile to go back. But there was just
13 feelings that I couldn't put in words and I couldn't understand that held me back. I
14 started seeing advertisements for military historical tours and a couple of units
15 specialized in these kinds of things and put them together and did all the arrangements. I
16 had become a guy who liked my creature comforts. I figured I didn't want to go back
17 there in that hot, smelly, awful place. Then Col. Warren Wiedhan, who is a retired
18 Marine and runs military served tours always stories to get some well known figure to
19 sort of highlight each tour. As they were putting together this thirtieth anniversary of the
20 siege of Khe Sanh, members of Khe Sanh kind of thing he got Carl Mundy, the retired
21 commandant to headline it. Of course I told you Mundy was the guy I reported to when I
22 went into the 3/26 way back when. He sort of encouraged me and I called him and asked
23 him and he encouraged me to go along. I said, "What the hell? If I'm not going to do it
24 now, I'm never going to do it and it'd be fun to go back with Carl." Then I told my
25 friend, I have a friend Jay French who lives close to me. He's a lawyer in Washington.
26 He was in my class at Yale. This is a great story. I'd never met him at Yale. He was a
27 Navy ROTC at Yale and I never met him. He got out of Yale and went into the Marine
28 Corps. He was at Khe Sanh. He was in the 1st Battalion 26th Marines so he was in the
29 same regiment I was. He came back to Washington after he got out of Khe Sanh. He got
30 out of the Marine Corps and he went to law school. He went to GW (George Washington
31 University) and I went to Georgetown University. He then worked for Vice President

1 Ford and was working in the White House. I worked in the White House after I got back
2 from Vietnam while I was in the Marine Corps. So we had all these commonalities, but
3 we'd never met. My wife's college roommate had worked with Jay at the vice
4 president's office and she introduced us. We quickly became fast friends. So when I
5 went back I didn't think Jay would want to go, but I told him about it, and he decided to
6 go. He and I, I knew Mundy but I didn't know anybody else. The dynamics of a group
7 like that and how quickly they get to know each other and become friends under those
8 circumstances is kind of fun and interesting. We went back and we all enjoyed it very,
9 very much. That's why I went.

10 RV: Where did you go?

11 TE: Well we were required to go to Hanoi, so we landed in Hanoi and I was not
12 looking forward to that. I thought Hanoi would be a gray, grim capital and it was run by
13 the commies and all that. It's actually a very lovely city. It sort of has a lot of old
14 French-Colonial atmosphere and buildings and parks and so forth. The people were
15 cordial, but reserved. I remember right after we got there, we got to the hotel and—

16 RV: Where did you stay? Do you remember which hotel?

17 TE: I have it written down somewhere but I can't remember. It wasn't one of the
18 big ones. It was just sort of a tourist kind of hotel, but it was perfectly comfortable. It
19 was only a block or two from what they call the Old Quarter. So we had an hour or two
20 before dinner and we had been told not to wander off by ourselves. But I never regarded
21 that. I've always had patrols in Washington and parts of Washington I'm not supposed to
22 go through. I think Vietnam addicted me to risks. I have to seek it out once in a while.
23 So I decided to strike off by myself. Jay took a nap and I went walking in the Quarter.
24 This is right after we got there. When you first get there you don't actually have
25 flashbacks, but seeing these people and knowing you're in North Vietnam and knowing
26 they're the enemy is very off putting. I really was nervous. I really felt like I was
27 running a patrol or something. I walked over there in the Old Quarter and it's about
28 supertime. These buildings are all packed together, there's lots of people living in there
29 there's fairly wide sidewalks and narrow streets, I'm walking around and it's warm day.
30 They're all out on the street getting ready for dinner. They're cooking dinner right there
31 on the street. The whole family is there so the sidewalks are clogged with people. I have

1 to step over a lot of these people. I'm just walking right through them. Here I am this
2 six-foot tall, probably they could tell I was American. I obviously stand out like a sore
3 thumb and nobody's even looking at me. Nobody caught my eye, they just ignored me.
4 Occasionally as I walked through some little kids playing one of them would sort of look
5 up and look at me funny but totally ignored me, which I found I kind of interesting and
6 bizarre and totally different than it was in South Vietnam when we got there. So we were
7 there and we went to see Uncle Ho and they told us not to make any wisecracks. We
8 went to the military museum where it's got all these shot down jets and their version of
9 things, which is totally propaganda. Then from there we flew down to Da Nang and
10 worked our way up to Dong Ha by bus, up Route 1 which was quite an experience. I was
11 sitting shotgun and the traffic dynamic on Route 1 is just amazing. Then from Dong Ha
12 we worked our way went on Route 9 to Khe Sanh. In 1998, that trip took us two hours
13 and forty-five minutes. In 2003, it took us forty-five minutes because they were working
14 on the road then. They were straightening it out. Doing culverts and everything else.
15 They've really improved it; Route 9 is now probably the best road in Vietnam. So we
16 went out to the combat base. When we went to the combat base there was a cement
17 marker there that basically celebrated the tremendous victory of the People's Army over
18 the United States and their puppets. But that was all. We did not get a chance to go to
19 881 because you couldn't get a helicopter. You couldn't get a helicopter in Vietnam.
20 You can't get any cars, trucks or buses up there, so you didn't have time to walk. So we
21 sort of viewed it from afar when we went down to the Lang Vei Special Forces Camp.
22 We could just barely see it from the corner. I knew we would be able to because I
23 remember on the night of February fourth or fifth I think it was when that Special Forces
24 Camp was overrun the first time the enemy used tanks. We heard the tanks. We actually
25 observed the bombing run the next morning that chased the tanks back into Laos. So that
26 was the only glimpse I got. I could tell the hill was still there. It had some grass on it but
27 that's all I could tell. That was one of the things that I missed and that's why I went back
28 the second time. We went around Con Thien and Leatherneck Square and Camp Carroll
29 and all these different places.

30 RV: How was it being back for you there?

1 TE: Initially I was nervous especially when we were like walking out in the rice
2 paddies or the trails. I immediately reverted back to a high state of alert and scanning for
3 trip wires and signs and anything unusual. It was very uncomfortable that first time. By
4 the time we'd been there, we were there almost two weeks. At the end of the time I think
5 I was adjusting to that. At first I was on total alert. Everything was potentially lethal.
6 That was discomfoting, but I got over that. It's funny because I went back a second time
7 I didn't have any of that but I noticed it in the guys that were going for the first time. Just
8 sort of a natural reaction I guess.

9 RV: On your second trip did you get to 881?

10 TE: Yeah.

11 RV: What was that like? What did you do?

12 TE: The trip over as you can probably guess, or if you've done it you know it's
13 arduous. A lot of hours in planes. By the time you get there, you're tired and exhausted
14 and jet lagged and all the rest of it. This time we landed in Hanoi but we didn't stay
15 there. We visited Hanoi on the way at the end of the trip. Once we go to Hanoi we got
16 on another airplane. We were supposed to fly into Phu Bai. Things were late so the Phu
17 Bai airport had closed. We flew into Da Nang and we got on a bus and took the five hour
18 bus trip. It was all part of the same trip and we finally got to Dong Ha. The next
19 morning we went to Khe Sanh. We went out Route 9, and went to the combat base,
20 which now has a museum and more propaganda and an old U.S. tank they had set at the
21 entrance and a sign pointing you toward this historical point of interest. We went to Lang
22 Vei and then we stayed over night in Khe Sanh Village. Khe Sanh's guesthouse is very
23 humble but we stayed there. Then at o'dark thirty we got up and prepared to hike to the
24 hill. Now I knew that we were going to walk up and I knew it was going to be rigorous
25 so I had worked pretty hard at getting myself in shape. A couple times a day I would go
26 down to the garage and hike up the fourteen flights of stairs to my office otherwise get
27 myself in better physical condition because I knew it was going to be difficult. I wasn't
28 even 40 percent in the shape I should have been. It just kicked my ass. We got on these
29 little buses and went through what are now the suburbs of Khe Sanh. We drove out to
30 this Montagnard village. We picked up our guide there. The guide was the chief of the
31 village and a couple of his henchmen. So they took us out there. We hiked through some

1 rice paddies and then up over the shoulder of a hill and down again. It gave us a little bit
2 of a feel for how difficult it was going to be to climb. Then we got to the base of 881 and
3 climbed up. By the time we started climbing up it was hot. Although we drew a very
4 good day really, it wasn't as hot as normal and it wasn't as humid as normal and there
5 was a breeze. I mean it was just climb, climb, climb. You figure, "How hard can it be?"
6 You put one foot in front of the other and you take your time. It just was hard. We were
7 carrying our own water and stuff so we were carrying gear but not as much as we carried
8 then. About two-thirds of the way up I started experiencing definite signs of heat
9 exhaustion. Shivers and chills and all that sort of thing. By this time, there were I
10 believe thirteen of us trying to make it up there. It was a smaller group. Several had
11 dropped out already. I knew I could tell that I should drop out. I just couldn't bring
12 myself to it. So I sort of fell behind the rest of them for a while. They stopped; they
13 found a little copse of trees and they stopped there and I laid down my bag. After about
14 twenty minutes they decided to start moving up. I got up to go with them I got up and I
15 was just so dizzy I fell back down. I said, "I'm just going to wait here for a while. You
16 guys go and if I can make it, I'll make it." After another twenty minutes or so I decided
17 I'll just try to make it up there. So I walked the rest of the way by myself. Every step was
18 agony but I wanted to get there, so I did. So we get up to the top and it was pretty
19 recognizable. Then there had been no vegetation, just the red dirt. Now there was most
20 places, three or four feet of elephant grass and sorted other bushes and stuff, but no trees.
21 The big bombs craters are still apparent. Even though it's overgrown if you know where
22 to look you can find the trench line and some of the bunkers. I found the bunker I lived
23 in without much problem. First thing I did when I got there was go from the big hill
24 where India Company was then down to the smaller hill where Mike Company was
25 because somehow or another I understood that one of the reasons I wanted to go there
26 was as far as I'm concerned the two gunnies are still there. I think I told you on February
27 twenty-third, I lost two gunnies on one round. They were in a small foxhole and that
28 round was near. It made mush of both of them. Found nothing basically. We shoveled a
29 couple shovelfuls of bloody mud into the bag and sent them home. But for all practical
30 purposes 90 percent of their molecules are still there. As far as I'm concerned that's
31 where they were buried. That's where they lived. It's a toss up between that moment,

1 the moment when they died and the death of Mike Thomas as to which was the most
2 singular traumatic and emotional moment in my life. I think it probably was Thomas
3 because I was watching. That was the instant I realized we were playing for keeps. Up
4 until then you sort of feel like if it really got bad you could call time out or something.
5 That sort of drove home the reality. But losing those two gunnies and leaving me up
6 there by myself with those guys I still remember the feeling, it was not a good one. So I
7 mourned that loss ever since. People talk about, everybody would say, “Are you going
8 over there for closure?” I would say, “No, I don’t need closure.” Maybe in this one
9 respect, with respect to them, maybe that’s what I was looking for. I don’t know. I knew
10 I could find the hole because it was in the bottom of this two thousand pound bomb
11 crater, which obviously was still going to be there. Once I found my bunker I knew
12 where to go to find that one and I did. It was there, it had a bit of grass growing in it.
13 There were some lovely little flowering plants with little purple flowers all around it. I
14 crawled down in there and found the hole and said a prayer. It was kind of unfortunate. I
15 had bought a new camera to go over there. A tiny little Sony thing. It’s digital and it
16 does digital and stills on these memory sticks that are like sticks of chewing gum. It just
17 had all kinds of little gizmos it was really neat. I lugged it up there, but it was new to me
18 and I wasn’t familiar with how long the battery lasted and I exhausted the battery before I
19 got there. So I don’t have any of my own pictures from up there. But the tour guide and
20 his son who was along, walked down there to that hill with me and they took some
21 pictures. So I took a couple pictures. So I got a couple of pictures. Not very dramatic, I
22 think it’s just a bunch of grass and hole in the ground. Means something to me.

23 RV: Of course.

24 TE: So then I went back up and joined the rest of the guys on the higher part of
25 the hill. Frank Gullledge, who was the webmaster of Purple Foxes and whose idea this
26 tour had been, was with us. He had made sort of an 8.5 x 11 plaque that on one side
27 listed guys who had died up there. On the other side had some of Dave Powell’s pictures.
28 He’d had it laminated and so forth. We decided we were going to leave it there. He
29 asked me to do the honors. So actually I had been carrying it up there. Frank is one of
30 the guys—Frank is well into his sixties. He was one of the guys that didn’t make it.
31 When it looked like I might not make it I gave it to Owen Matthews. He was a guy who

1 was the 2nd Platoon commander after Mike Thomas, the guy who blew the bugle for flags
2 and stuff. I had met him at a reunion and he heard about this. He said he wanted to go,
3 but he wasn't going to go unless I went because he wouldn't know what the hell he was
4 doing or where he was, he needed a guide. He went along and I gave it to him. I said, "If
5 I don't make it up there you've got to do this." When I got there, he gave it back to me.
6 We went over and we found a little holes, one of the holes there was actually an angle
7 iron sticking out of it that we lashed the remembrance to. I'm sure that if the authorities
8 knew what we were doing they would have been unhappy. We expect it's going to be a
9 while before the authorities find it. I made a little speech and said a little prayer. When I
10 had gone the first time in the Hong Kong Airport Jay French and I had bought a fifth of
11 Remy Martin Cognac. We kept it along used it to offer a toast at Khe Sanh and so forth.
12 I thought that was a great idea so I did the same thing this time. I put some of the cognac
13 into a small empty soda bottle and packed it. I had forgotten about it when I got up there.
14 When I left that copse of trees I left my pack and everything there. I had this in my side
15 pocket, cargo pants pocket. Just as we were leaving the hill I remember it and passed it
16 around and offered a toast. Then we had to go back down. Every step I took up I said,
17 "God, I've got to come back down this way." Gravity helps, but when you're as
18 exhausted as I was just keeping the brakes on all the way down was difficult. So I just
19 took it a step at a time and took my time and we made it. On that hike, I drank five liters
20 of water and one liter of Gatorade and never urinated. I mean you know you're not as
21 good of shape now as you were when you were twenty-four, but the difference is much
22 worse than I thought. Then we got down to the village and we had to go through a little
23 ceremony with the chief. The chief was forty years old; I don't think he broke a sweat.
24 He did it in his shower shoes. Unbelievable.

25 RV: I believe you.

26 TE: So we went back to his house and he has this nice big house, Bru style up on
27 stilts, a thatched roof. There's cross beams and then the floor is covered with split
28 bamboo. It's not even fastened down. We were being very careful that we didn't punch
29 through it because we were a lot heavier than they were. We're in there and he's got his
30 color television and his stereo and his six or eight kids and his wife. We all sat around in
31 there and we brought some stuff along to give to him, mainly for the kids, school supplies

1 and stuff. He went and got some of his best sake and passed that around. We met his
2 wife and kids. As we were leaving I realized I remembered that I had probably about six
3 or eight ounces of that cognac. I asked the guide, we had a local guy along in addition to
4 our guide that works for the tour company. We had a local interpreter, Vietnamese
5 guides. We always assumed and I think they were right. If not government security
6 people, if not they certainly report to them. They're really nice guys and they're
7 educated and they're very helpful. I asked him whether it would be appropriate to give
8 that to the chief. He said yes. So I left that with the chief. It took us all day to do that.
9 Then we hopped on these buses and we were exhausted and we drove back to Dong Ha
10 that night. I'm glad I did it. If I'd have known how physically arduous it is, I probably
11 wouldn't have tried it. But I'm glad I did it. I'm certainly glad I made it to the top.

12 RV: I can imagine so. Let me ask a couple questions about today's
13 remembrances of Vietnam and how the public sees the Vietnam War. First, what do you
14 think about the movies that have been made about the Vietnam War?

15 TE: I think most of them have had enough weirdness in them that it reinforces the
16 stereotype of the drugged out mentally deranged Vietnam veteran. Man there were
17 aspects. For example, *Apocalypse Now*, I thought that putting aside the speakers and
18 Robert Duval's infatuation with surfing. That and the presentation of that attack on that
19 village was very realistic. There are parts of *Full Metal Jacket* that are very realistic.
20 *Platoon* there are scenes in there that I identified with. All of those have this overarching
21 message of wrongness, futility and weirdness that I think colors and reinforces the
22 generally negative image of the Vietnam veteran. It's inaccurate; I think it's unfair. I
23 think it's unfortunate.

24 RV: What about *We Were Soldiers*?

25 TE: I read the book before I saw it. I thought it was pretty good. Somehow or
26 other I don't remember exactly what my criticisms were but I had some. It didn't satisfy
27 me as being exactly right. But yeah, giving me the feeling of chaos in those frantic
28 moments of combat yes it was very good at that. It is probably one of the best. When I
29 came back I sort of planned on and thought I owed it or ought to write a book. I sort of
30 felt bad that I never quite got started because I really didn't know how to get started.
31 Then Jim Webb wrote *Fields of Fire* and I read it. It's not exactly my experience and it's

1 not exactly the story I would have told. It basically told the story well enough that I felt
2 like if I wanted to write a book fine, but I didn't need to. I felt relieved of the duty. He's
3 participating himself in the making of a movie on that right now. I hold great hope that
4 will be the Vietnam War movie, or at least the one that comes closest to my experience.

5 RV: What kind of lessons do you think the United States learned in Vietnam and
6 from the experience?

7 TE: Not very many. At least in words, the Powell Doctrine if you will, of not
8 committing Americans to a combat situation or a potential combat situation without
9 knowing why we're going there and what constitutes victory and having an exit strategy
10 certainly is the most profound and most important lesson we learned. I hear it spoken,
11 but I don't necessarily see it applied in all situations. It certainly wasn't applied in
12 Somalia. Powell actually had some role in at least the initial incursion in that country
13 which was just supposed to be a humanitarian effort but escalated. Even looking where
14 we are in Iraq today, the press kept screaming, "Vietnam, Vietnam," to the point where I
15 was tired of hearing it. But even before the combat ended the answers I heard from the
16 White House and the Defense Department sounded an awful lot to me like what we heard
17 in Vietnam from the White House and Defense Department. Now of course we're in a
18 situation that I don't care whether they want to call it a guerilla war or not, that's what it
19 is. We really don't know how we're going to get out. There's talk of we can't do it with
20 hundred and fifty thousand troops, we need another hundred thousand troops. It sounds
21 an awful lot like Vietnam to me.

22 RV: Yes, sir.

23 TE: I'm not casting stones at anybody, but I think that Lyndon Johnson and
24 McNamara and George Bundy and even Walt Rostow, I think they were fine human
25 beings. I think they were smart and well intentioned and I think they were doing their
26 best. I don't think they were evil people. I just think they got sucked into a situation that
27 initially they didn't understand, then they couldn't get out of. They couldn't find a way
28 out of it that was satisfactory on a post military and political basis. It looks an awful lot
29 like the situation we're in right now in Iraq. I don't know how the hell we're going to get
30 out. We can't just pull out and let the thing crater. We've created a mess; we've got to
31 clean it up. We have not been very adept, at least so far in doing it to the satisfaction of

1 the people there. Sort of cramming our western solutions down their throats. I really do
2 question how much we learned about it. One thing we obviously learned was not to just
3 turn the media loose on the war. This controlling of reporters and embedding them and
4 all that kind of stuff is obviously an attempt to prevent the kind of free form reporting
5 that was so damaging in Vietnam. I approve of that, I don't have any problem with that.
6 I think the major lesson we learned about being very careful about committing troops is
7 one that I still have questions about whether we really learned it or not or whether we
8 need to relearn it. Americans are like that. Whoever it was that said those that don't
9 study history are doomed to repeat it, is applying it to Americans, and applying to
10 politicians. I mean Clinton and his scandal, if he hadn't learned—why hadn't he learned
11 what everybody else knew about Nixon and his problems? I mean it wasn't the initial act
12 that caused the problem. It was the cover up, it was the denial. He didn't learn it. In
13 Vietnam, we had this thirteen months for Marines and twelve months for everybody else
14 tour. I guess that was good in the sense that it was if you were subjected to those
15 conditions and it was never ending. That probably would have been at a significantly
16 adverse effect on morale. What it really did was mean we had to keep relearning the
17 same lessons in combat over and over and we didn't learn them. Since I've been back I
18 told you, I've read a lot of books. I can give you three books that talk about American
19 battalions walking into a regimental ambush, a year or more apart and within a hundred
20 meters of the same spot. I have pictures of these NVA regiment saying, "Here they come
21 again," and they just do a replay, including the one the 3/26 walked into in September of
22 1967. Now, why did each new battalion commander or each new regimental commander
23 have to learn the same lesson the same hard way? I mean we made efforts to pass on
24 information and lessons learned all that sort of thing. That lack of continuity in command
25 was devastating and was very expensive. It went on for six or seven years. People
26 apparently never got the word. It's kind of frustrating but it still goes on.

27 RV: What would you tell the younger generation today about the Vietnam War?

28 TE: I think the primary lesson I still feel almost a responsibility to my troops.
29 I'm a little more educated and a little more articulate and have a little better access than
30 they do. Try to spread the message that they're not all a bunch of losers; they're not all a
31 bunch of baby killers. When I got *Stolen Valor* I ordered probably fifty copies and sent

1 them around to people I thought ought to read them, including people in the press, and
2 people in Congress. Said, “You guys created this image. It’s up to you to get it right.”
3 Unfortunately I don’t think it’s had much effect. That’s one thing I would talk about. I
4 don’t think I told you; earlier this year before I went to Vietnam I was having my haircut
5 at the barbershop in Watergate. I notice a book bag sitting there and sticking out of the
6 top of the book bag was a book called *After Tet*, which is a book written by Ron Spector,
7 which I had read. I thought that was kind of interesting and I looked over and saw this
8 kid that probably was a GW college student and I thought it probably was his. So when I
9 got ready to leave I said, “Are you reading that book?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “Why are
10 you reading it?” He said, “It’s required in this course I’m taking on the Vietnam War.” I
11 said, “Oh really? Who’s the professor?” He said, “Mr. Spector.” So I was kind of
12 curious that there was—because my experience has been that most of the younger
13 generation doesn’t even know anything about the Vietnam War. They don’t know what
14 it was; they don’t know why we were there. Their ignorance is colossal. I know that the
15 Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Jan Scruggs’s people have come up with an educational
16 package that they mailed to high school history teachers and stuff. They encourage
17 veterans to get involved in that. I’ve sort of toyed with that idea, but I’ve never done it
18 because until recently I lived in Montgomery County and Montgomery County is as
19 liberal a place as you can imagine. I’m already so much out of touch with all those
20 people I don’t see any point in accentuating it. I didn’t think they would appreciate me
21 having to talk to their kids about the Vietnam War anyway. So I hadn’t done that but I
22 did contact Spector and say, “I’m, surprised there’s a college class on the Vietnam War.
23 I’d like to monitor it if you don’t mind.” He said, “Well the university has a policy
24 unless you’re an alumnus you can’t do that. But there’s no reason you couldn’t come talk
25 to the kids.” So we set a date shortly after I got back from Vietnam. I went over there to
26 the class. The main reason I went over is I sort of wanted to see who these kids were and
27 find out why they were talking this class. It was interesting. Several of them they were
28 taking it because they had a relative who’d been there or hadn’t come back from there.
29 Others sort of saw some parallels between the circumstances then and the circumstances
30 now and wanted to learn more about whether that was correct or not. All of them I think
31 knew about or had heard about in many different respects the sixties and how strange and

1 weird and different they were and wanted to get tuned in a little better to that whole thing.
2 I think the young people recognize the young people, the students and demonstrators
3 played a significant role in most politics and the conclusion of the war. I think that sort
4 of is a beacon to them instead of feeling totally ignored and frustrated it's an example of
5 the fact that they do have a little bit of power. Maybe they can be listened to under the
6 right circumstances. I think they're interested in finding out more about that. I went over
7 there figuring I was just going to observe Spector in his class. When I got there he
8 introduced me and turned it over to me. So I just told a little bit about what I had done
9 and told them about my trip that I had just completed, going back. Then they asked me a
10 bunch of questions. It was a thoroughly enjoyable afternoon.

11 RV: That's good. Tom, is there anything else that you'd like to talk about or
12 anything that we have not covered that you wanted to discuss?

13 TE: Let me see. I think I got most of my individual stories. Here's one that I
14 didn't. I told you about my refusal to obey that order and that major and getting away
15 with it.

16 RV: Yes, sir.

17 TE: Again I've always been sort of unhappy with the 1st Division, because I felt
18 like when we got there they just shunted us out in the mountains where none of them
19 would go and they forgot about us. So coming back to Hill 55, I think it was, it could
20 have been Hill 10; one of the regimental bases there. After we'd been out in the jungle
21 for like four weeks, we'd flown back and we're getting there in helicopters. We landed
22 helicopters on the helipad and we were walking up the hill away from the pad. As I was
23 walking up the hill I saw this Marine captain standing there clean pressed utilities, shined
24 boots. He said something to my gunnery sergeant about—very critical about our
25 appearance. "Whose troops are these? They're a disgrace to the Marine Corps." We
26 were pretty disreputable looking group of guys. We'd been out there for a long time,
27 utilities were dirty and soiled and rotten. Some of them were wearing non-regulation
28 caps and so forth and we were dirty. So the gunny went over and was explaining to this
29 guy what was going on. This guy, I was sort of standing behind the gunny, listening to
30 the gunny and him talk. This guy said, "That's no excuse. This is an outrage, yadda,
31 dada, da," and he just went on and on in a very high and mighty kind of tone. He looked

1 at me and said, "Are you responsible for these people?" I said, "Yes," and he started in
2 on me. So I just lost it. I jumped him and put my thumbs on his windpipe, knocked him
3 to the ground and was trying to choke him. The gunny pulled me off. I just wasn't going
4 to take that shit from him.

5 RV: What was his rank?

6 TE: He was a captain I was a lieutenant. When he pulled me off, that was the
7 end of it. I never heard anymore about it. But if the gunny hadn't pulled me off, I might
8 very well have finished him off right there.

9 RV: This is in front of your men?

10 TE: Yeah.

11 RV: So they could see that you would absolutely stick up for them?

12 TE: Absolutely. I'm just looking here at the notes I made last night. I think
13 we've covered most everything. Here's one that was fun. It goes all the way back to the
14 beginning. Remember I was three months behind the rest of my basic school class in
15 going to Vietnam because the Defense Language Institute, the Vietnamese language. So
16 I was going through Okinawa in early September. I was walking along the side of the
17 road and all of a sudden this jeep screeches to a halt. Two guys jump out and said,
18 "Esslinger, we heard you were dead." Two guys from my basic school class had been to
19 Vietnam and had been wounded and were back on Okinawa. They'd heard that I was
20 dead. It turned out that during that summer there had been an Esslinger killed over there.
21 A Lance Corporal Esslinger, his name's on the Wall. That's not a very common name,
22 so the word got around that Esslinger had been killed. That was before I'd even gotten
23 there. I thought that was kind of funny. I talked earlier about the effects of the B-52
24 strikes on the enemy. Normally they would not drop B-52 strikes closer than three
25 thousand meters to friendlies because these planes are flying at thirty thousand feet and
26 just a minor miscalculation up there could cover a lot of territory. But when we were on
27 the hill, there was a ridge just to our west, about eight hundred meters away. The enemy,
28 we knew they lived right up to our wire. At night the closer they could get to our wire,
29 the safer they were from our harassment and interdiction fire. We knew they had taken
30 over the water point at the bottom of the hill that we used to use for water. So they were
31 everywhere. As part of the intelligence that was when they began dropping those spikes

1 that had sonic devices on them. So there was a lot of activity. They would send a radio
2 signal back. They also flew helicopters around those measures. We called them people
3 sniffers. They had a pod in the nose of the helicopter that would sniff the air and measure
4 it for nitrogen, ureic acid content. When they got a concentration of it, they knew the
5 enemy was massing. They had apparently gotten a pretty heavy reading on this ridgeline
6 one night. Of course we had no advanced notice. It was the middle of the night. I just
7 happened to be lying out on top of the bunker, just because I wanted to get some air. I
8 wanted to get out of the bunker. I'm just lying up there. All of a sudden that ridgeline
9 just explodes. I mean the earth shakes like an earthquake, even where I am. Pieces of
10 steel half my size are flying across the top of our hill. I mean it was just awesome. Of
11 course fire and explosions and rumbling. We used to call them arc lights. That was the
12 nickname for them because they just created this dramatic lightning like light effect when
13 they exploded. By the time those bombs landed those pilots had already turned their
14 planes around at thirty thousand feet and were heading back. I mean how would you like
15 to fight the war that way? Get in the plane, you fly six hours of total boredom, drop your
16 bombs and then you fly six hours back to Guam, then you do it again the next day.
17 That's what they did. That was probably the closest firing we've got to a B-52 strike. It
18 just scared the living bejeebers out of me. I couldn't imagine being a target of that and
19 surviving it and continuing to fight. That was would have sapped my resolve I'm sure.

20 RV: In around Khe Sanh that was daily.

21 TE: These guys, we just blew away that jungle. Between the B-52 strikes and the
22 Agent Orange, that lovely lush jungle around Khe Sanh was turned brown. That was
23 pretty scary.

24 RV: I can imagine.

25 TE: I told you I've read a lot of books. I've developed a little pet point here I
26 want to unload on you. I think that in 1945, we made a crucial decision. Everybody
27 knows that Ho Chi Minh asked us to help him. The French were asking for our
28 assistance in re-establishing their colony in Indo-China after the Japanese were defeated.

29 RV: Sir, can I pause you for just a moment please?

30 TE: Sure. Harry Truman had to make it but he was brand new president. Dean
31 Acheson the secretary of the state and he made that decision and obviously he made the

1 wrong one. I'm not blaming him for anything but it was obviously a crucial decision.
2 It's not hard to figure out why—instead of this funny looking little yellow guy who called
3 himself a communist we decided to go with Charles de Gaulle and the French. They
4 were our allies. That decision right there as far as I'm concerned cost millions of lives.
5 Later, a couple years later Acheson was still secretary of state when the Communists took
6 over China. The Democrats subsequent to that were always taking to task by the
7 Republicans for having lost China. That haunted the Democrats. I think and there are
8 plenty of people who agree with me, I know. That was one of the reasons that JFK and
9 subsequently LBJ couldn't extract themselves from Vietnam. JFK could not afford to be
10 the president that lost Southeast Asia to commies after they'd lost China to the commies.
11 LBJ didn't want to be the first president to lose the war. Despite the fact that both of
12 them decided early on that they couldn't win the war, JFK decided that in '63 and said he
13 would get out after the election in '64. His decision in '48 and the Democratic Party's
14 inability to do that. If you want to read books my favorites are AJ Lang—

15 RV: Okay, this will end the interview with Mr. Tom Esslinger. Thank you very
16 much sir.

17 TE: Thank you!