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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Stephen W. Dant
Conducted by Richard Burks Verrone, Ph.D.
March 4, 9; April 20, May 5, 11, 18, 25, 2005
Transcribed by Brooke Tomlin

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. I'm conducting an oral history
2 interview with Mr. Stephen W. Dant. Today is March 4, 2005. I'm in Lubbock, Texas in
3 the Special Collections Library Interview Room on the campus of Texas Tech University.
4 It's approximately 8:36 a.m. Central Standard Time and Mr. Dant is in Colorado Springs,
5 Colorado. Steve, why don't we start with some biographical information on yourself?
6 Can you tell me where you born, when you born and a little bit about your childhood?

7 Stephen Dant: I was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, August 30, 1949. Both of my
8 parents are Hoosiers, come from Indiana. My mom was from Indianapolis. My dad grew
9 up on a farm in southern Indiana. I lived in Indianapolis when I was very young then we
10 moved out to about, I don't know, 20 miles outside of Indianapolis into a rural area.
11 There was a pocket of about five or six homes. My dad commuted every day into
12 Indianapolis where he worked for the railroad as a low-end or a lower supervisory role of
13 scheduling cars for the, at that time, it was the New York Central Railroad. My parents
14 are devout Catholics. I'm what ended up being the oldest of 11 children. When we left
15 Indiana, when I was about ten or eleven years old, you know I was in the fourth grade.
16 My dad got transferred to Cleveland and I think when we left Indiana, I think there were
17 six of us. When we left Cleveland after two years, he got transferred to New York.

18 RV: New York City?

19 SD: New York City.

1 RV: How old were you when that happened?

2 SD: When I moved to New York I was seventh grade, so what's that 12, 13?

3 RV: Yes, around 13.

4 SD: Right. There were I think eight of us when we left Cleveland. Then there
5 were three more born in New York. I went to junior high and high school in a community
6 just outside of Peekskill, New York. Where I lost my midwestern accent and gained a
7 New York accent, which I've subsequently lost along the way as I got into broadcasting,
8 but that's another story.

9 RV: How do you spell Pink...?

10 SD: Peekskill. It's P-E-E-K-S-K-I-L-L.

11 RV: And whereabouts is that?

12 SD: It's about 45, 50 miles north of New York City, right on the Hudson River.

13 RV: Oh okay.

14 SD: The last, for a lot of trains the commuter stop into New York. So my dad took
15 the train into New York City every day.

16 RV: What was his job in New York?

17 SD: Similar to what it was in Indianapolis and in Cleveland. He worked in an
18 office that scheduled virtually all of the cars. For a while he worked with passenger, then
19 he worked with freight. You can imagine doing this without computers. All over the
20 entire line. So he was one of the supervisors of overseeing that.

21 RV: Did you have any people in your family, your dad or uncles or grandparents,
22 anybody involved in the military?

23 SD: Most of my uncles who were military age during World War II were deferred
24 because they were working on farms. My dad couldn't go into the Army because he had
25 health problems. He had MS as a child or some form of it. So all of his life he's had
26 problems getting around. I have had some cousins who were in the Army or Air Force
27 and I used to see them every once in a while.

28 RV: Tell me about your mom. What was she like? Did she work? I imagine she
29 had her hands full at home.

30 SD: Yes she did. She grew up in Indianapolis. She graduated from nursing school,
31 married my dad. She's a registered nurse, an RN, which is helpful bringing up 11 kids.

1 She was a good mom. We all seemed to do okay. She did work from time to time out of
2 the home. She would occasionally work weekends or work a night shift here and there to
3 kind of supplement the family income, which I would describe as lower middle-class.

4 RV: Well, you've moved around quite a bit here. You've gone; I'm counting four
5 different places by the time you were 13, or excuse me 14 or 15. Did you finish high
6 school in Peekskill?

7 SD: Yes.

8 RV: What was it like moving around like that? Was it difficult for you?

9 SD: It was and it wasn't. I mean in some ways looking back on it I think it better
10 prepares you for life and adjusting to new situations, but when you're growing up it's
11 tough because you're having to make new friends and get accepted in new places. In
12 those days, I'm not sure if this is true anymore but the Ohio school systems were ahead of
13 the Indiana school systems and the New York school systems, at least in the schools that
14 I went to, were ahead of the Ohio School systems, particularly in the math and science
15 area. So I can remember moving to Cleveland and leaving Indiana and just getting
16 through my multiplication tables and getting to Cleveland and they were standing up
17 there doing long division or something to that effect. (Laughter) Then it was another step
18 ahead when I moved from Ohio to New York. They were another half a grade ahead of
19 what I was in Ohio. That was probably the most difficult part of my move, is trying to
20 play catch-up.

21 RV: What kind of student were you Steve?

22 SD: Oh I would say I was Bs and Cs. Cs toward the end of my high school years
23 because I was less and less motivated.

24 RV: What were your favorite subjects?

25 SD: Favorite subject was history...English, Social Studies. Least favorite was
26 math and science.

27 RV: What were your duties at home? You were the oldest, what was expected of
28 you?

29 SD: When you're the oldest you kind of become a third parent once you reach a
30 certain age. Me and my sister...I have seven brothers by the way, three sisters. So me and
31 Mary Jane, the oldest girl, end up kind of taking on more responsibilities. Once you hit

1 about, oh I would say about 11 or 12, 13 you find yourself...you know the family goes to
2 church in segments. There are six that go into the early mass and another six go to the ten
3 o'clock mass. So if the parents are going together then Mary Jane and I would be
4 watching the group that was home. You learn to do things like make breakfast and you
5 know I could fry an egg when I was 11, 12 years old. I knew how to make meatloaf and
6 pork chops and all kinds of things.

7 RV: Did you like that? Did you enjoy that role? I mean I guess you didn't really
8 have a choice.

9 SD: You know I never really thought about it, just that it was there. So you deal
10 with, like everybody else, you deal with the cards that you are given or you play the cards
11 you're given. I'm mixing my metaphors.

12 RV: Do you think that helped you as a leader later in life?

13 SD: I think so, sure. You know one of the things as I've interviewed for jobs
14 along the way in the broadcast industry that I'm in and I tell people that I've been in
15 management all of my life.

16 RV: (Laughter) That's an excellent point. Let me ask you first of all, in New York
17 City, what was that like? Now this is in the 1950s, I presume, or early '60s.

18 SD: Early '60s.

19 RV: Oh, early '60s. Can you describe New York City to us?

20 SD: Well I used to go to New York every once in a while. I used to take dates in
21 high school. I could ride free on the train because my dad worked for the railroad so
22 everybody in the family had a train pass. In fact, side bar story, that's how we used to go
23 back and visit folks in Indiana after we moved to New York. We had a large family, had
24 a lot of aunts and uncles that also had a lot of children. Half of us would ride on the train
25 in Peekskill and get off in Indianapolis and the other half would ride the station wagon
26 across from New York to Indiana. So anyway, I used to go into the city every once in a
27 while. I would either catch a show or more often then not, with a couple of my friends we
28 would take the train into Grand Central and then get on a subway and go out Yankee
29 Stadium and watched the Yankees play a double header.

30 RV: I was going to ask you if you were a Yankees fan or a Mets fan.

1 SD: I'm not anymore but when I lived there I was a Yankee fan and had the
2 opportunity to see Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle and all of those guys.

3 RV: Wow. I bet that was a lot of fun. How many times were you going to games?
4 Did you go to two or three or did you...

5 SD: I would go a couple of games in the summer. At least two or three.

6 RV: Now that brings up sports. Were you into sports as a youngster?

7 SD: Oh yes. I loved playing baseball. I played a lot of sandlot basketball. I played
8 on the high school football team.

9 RV: What position did you play?

10 SD: I played defensive corner and first-string defense, second-string offense. I
11 played a lot of special teams, ran back kick-offs and was on a punting team and kick-off
12 team.

13 RV: Well tell me early 1960s, this is the Kennedy years. What was the mood like
14 in the house around John Kennedy, a Catholic President?

15 SD: Well I was in Catholic high school at the time. I went to one year of Catholic
16 high school, Archbishop Stepinac High School. Actually their annex, which was in
17 Tarrytown, New York. I remember being in a...oh God what were we in? We were in
18 some kind of assembly at the time and one of the Brothers walked in and said, 'The
19 President has been shot and it's reported that he's been killed.' I mean just the whole
20 place was just stunned. Nobody could move it seemed like for five or ten minutes.

21 RV: Were your parents supporters of Kennedy?

22 SD: Yes. As I remember, you know political talk in the house, politics were pretty
23 much Democratic, Democratic Party as opposed to Republican. I think that's changed
24 along the way over the last 30 years or whatever. I think both of my folks became more
25 Republican after Reagan became President. But yes, it was pretty much Democratic
26 politics in the house. I don't know how else to describe it, when Kennedy got shot and
27 killed, I mean it just stunned the family and there was... and I think it stunned everybody.

28 RV: Sure, absolutely. Did you like Kennedy? Do you remember how you thought
29 about him as a President?

30 SD: You know I remember liking him. There was an aura around that White
31 House at the time. I remember the aura being as much around Jacqueline Kennedy as

1 much as being around John Kennedy. I mean she brought something to the White House
2 that I don't know; I would describe it as sophistication. Well the women that I was
3 around including my mom admired her very much for whatever reason. I think maybe
4 some of it was the fact there were young kids in the White House and that hadn't been the
5 case in a long time. They were all families with young kids so you could relate somewhat
6 on that level as well.

7 RV: Right. Tell me about your high school years. What do you remember most
8 about high school when you think back?

9 SD: You know I enjoyed high school. I didn't enjoy the academic part of it
10 towards the end because I was still in some ways trying to play catch-up from my earlier
11 years, but I had a good set of friends in high school. I found that I was adept at...you
12 know how there are different cliques in high school? I found that I could hang out with
13 the jocks and that I could also hang out with the more blue-collar folks because I could
14 kind of relate to them coming from...I felt like I had some blue-collar background. I was
15 also on the class council. I don't know how I got elected to that. And if you're on a high
16 school football team that helps as well.

17 RV: Sure, right. What about girlfriends? Were you dating in high school?

18 SD: Yes, I was dating in high school. I had a pretty steady girlfriend throughout
19 most of my high school years. We kind of separated after we both went to college.

20 RV: What years were you there in high school Steve?

21 SD: Well I went to two different high schools. I should back up on that. I went to
22 a Catholic high school, which I really hated.

23 RV: Why?

24 SD: Because I found that you were either there because you were going to be a
25 priest or a brother or you had some kind of problems. People were starting to try to
26 straighten you out by putting you in a stricter school. So I didn't fit into that mold very
27 well. In fact, I ended up getting into a couple of fights in high school with guys who
28 thought they were buster badasses. I really was the kind of person that even if I thought I
29 wasn't to win this fight I wasn't backing up an inch. So I won a couple and lost a couple
30 but it really seemed like it was a very tense ninth grade. So I convinced my parents,
31 although I think it broke my mother's heart at the time after I had been in parochial

1 school for nine years to go to the public high school. She was mad at me for a while but
2 eventually she got over it.

3 RV: (Laughter) So you spent your ninth grade year at the Catholic High School.

4 SD: Then I went to Lakeland High School, which is actually in Shrub Oak, New
5 York, which is kind of a community just outside of Peekskill.

6 RV: What year did you graduate?

7 SD: 1967.

8 RV: Wow, right there in the middle of the war.

9 SD: Right in the middle of it.

10 RV: Tell me before we go past high school, what was your impression of first
11 Lyndon Johnson taking over and what he was doing as President and did you have much
12 of an opinion or not? Then let me know what you thought about the Vietnam War and
13 what was happening in Southeast Asia.

14 SD: I didn't know what to think Lyndon Johnson other than to know he certainly
15 wasn't the, not a word I think I would have used at the time, but charismatic leader that
16 John Kennedy was. I did as I was in high school, as you start moving out of your
17 freshmen year to sophomore year to junior year you suddenly become more aware of the
18 Vietnam War because you start to know people who are soldiers who are going over
19 there or coming back home. You know, I think there was an apprehension that some of us
20 were going to have to go over there although we all understood that we all had
21 friends...as you get into your junior year then you know friends who go off to college
22 who are dealing with the deferments that a college will get you. I'm not sure I'm
23 answering your question.

24 RV: No you are exactly, totally. Now this is a unique time for you. I would
25 imagine that you do know people that are graduating a couple of years in front of you
26 who are faced with going to a war, going to college, you know and making a choice or
27 not having a choice sometimes.

28 SD: I remember there were a couple of young teachers, particularly a History
29 teacher I had and I don't remember his name. I think it was my sophomore or junior year,
30 and obviously if he's just graduated from college and he's 22 or 23 years old, he's in
31 good health. I don't think he was married at the time. Man he was top of the list to be

1 drafted. So I had a few teachers like that. He got into trouble as I recall and this happened
2 back in the '60s as well as it happens today for espousing some of his beliefs about the
3 war in the classroom. On one afternoon, it was a Friday afternoon or something he was in
4 the classroom and he was playing Bob Dylan songs to the class.

5 RV: (Laughter) Okay. What were you all thinking when you're hearing Dylan
6 sing?

7 SD: I thought it was cool at the time, but as I remember he got in some trouble for
8 that. I think that summer he got drafted.

9 RV: Do you know whatever happened to him?

10 SD: No, I don't.

11 RV: Well what did you think of the Vietnam War? Did you know why the United
12 States was even there or was it kind of a mystery to you all?

13 SD: I remember hearing a lot about the domino effect, you know if we didn't stop
14 the Communists in Southeast Asia then the next place was going to be Thailand, then it
15 was going to be the Philippines. So I think I kind of bought into that when I first heard it.
16 We come through World War II. You know I was the generation that was the sons of,
17 you know...a lot of World War II Veterans were parents of kids my age.

18 RV: Yes.

19 SD: I had one cousin who was in the Korean War so I kind of acquitted [accepted]
20 it, I guess, kind of thought of it as another Korea.

21 RV: Did your cousin talk to you about Korea?

22 SD: No. At that time I was kind of really young and just kind of amazed to see
23 this guy in uniform.

24 RV: Did you think at all when you were a kid, not in high school but when you
25 were really young about wearing that uniform, about going into the military?

26 SD: I guess I enjoyed cowboy and Indian pictures. I liked wartime pictures but I
27 never really thought of myself as being a professional soldier if that's what you're asking.

28 RV: Did you see yourself like, 'Wow, I would like to be a soldier one day, or I
29 would like to be a Marine one day,?' Tell me Steve, when you graduated in '67 I mean
30 the war is in full swing here. Tell me about going to college. Were you encouraged to go

1 to college? Did you want to go? Was it something to do with the war, about your entry
2 into college?

3 SD: I did want to go to college. I did see myself as getting a degree in something.
4 I wasn't sure what. I did have an interest even at that time in broadcasting.

5 RV: Did your parents say, 'Steve, we really want you to go on and continue your
6 education,' or was it really up to you?

7 SD: They encouraged me to go to school to get a college degree. My parents
8 didn't have Bachelor's degrees but my dad had an associate degree and my mother an RN
9 in a two-year program. So they understood the value of a higher education. So I was
10 encouraged to go to school. All of my friends were going to college. Most of the group
11 that I was hanging out with, it was just a given that you were going somewhere; so I kind
12 of rode that whole wave.

13 RV: Where were you interested in going?

14 SD: I was interested in going to the SUNY system, which is really the one that I
15 could afford because I was going to have to pay for this myself with my student loans,
16 because my parents couldn't afford it. My grades had deteriorated enough by the time I
17 was in my senior year that most of the places I got accepted to were two year schools,
18 junior colleges so that's where I ended up going.

19 RV: Which one did you go to?

20 SD: Went to SUNY [State University of New York] at Morrisville, New York, up
21 near Syracuse.

22 RV: And you were there for two years?

23 SD: I was there for [less than] a year. I was totally bored, uninspired. I was
24 partying a lot. I was a disc jockey at the school radio station. I was on the basketball
25 team. I was on the ski team and I wasn't doing a whole lot of studying, even with the
26 Vietnam War hanging over my head I just didn't get inspired to go to school.

27 RV: So what happened after the year?

28 SD: I think I had a bad case of...what do they give kids Ritalin for?

29 RV: Attention Deficit. (Laughter)

1 SD: Attention Deficit Disorder. Ritalin probably would have helped me. I was a
2 pretty hyper person and I was partying, too. I was smoking too much marijuana, which a
3 lot of people were doing at the time.

4 RV: Yes, I mean this is right in the middle of the...

5 SD: '60s.

6 RV: The '60s, right. A lot of stuff happened socially in the country. Do you
7 remember what you thought about the Civil Rights movement? It was really '57 to
8 '64,'65.

9 SD: I was four square behind what was happening in the Civil Rights Movement.
10 I saw the things on TV that were going on in Alabama and Mississippi and marches in
11 Washington and there was no question in my mind that...if I would have been on the
12 streets I would have been marching with the folks for the civil rights as opposed to the
13 cops that were trying to beat them over the head with night sticks. I think most of my
14 friends, my peer group at the time, felt the same way. There were a lot of women's rights
15 groups.

16 RV: Yes.

17 SD: Women's issues at the same time too. That's the time that the bras started
18 coming off, which was nice in a way.

19 RV: (Laughter) I wasn't going to say anything. I was going to let you take that
20 one. This is a time of social revolution in the United States and you're smack dab in the
21 middle of it and you're in your first year of college and you're having a good time. So
22 after this year up at Morrisville what were your plans?

23 SD: I dropped out of Morrisville and moved back home and was going for about a
24 year or so to a community college there but it ended up [first] being more part time than
25 full time.

26 RV: That insured your deferment I take it?

27 SD: Yes.

28 RV: About that time my dad got transferred again. He got transferred to
29 Philadelphia. So they moved to Newark, Delaware, which is just south Wilmington.
30 Wilmington is just a short train ride into Philly. So I got an apartment over near the
31 community college and was there for about six months. That neighborhood ended up

1 turning into a rough neighborhood and a lot of drug dealers were living there and police
2 were showing up a lot at night and I thought, 'I got to get out of here.' So I quit school
3 and followed my folks down to Delaware and got a full time job working for some
4 division at DuPont, you know making, no, what was I doing? I was testing some kind of
5 equipment that went into fighter aircraft.

6 RV: So in the defense industry, in a way.

7 SD: Yes, right.

8 RV: This is what, 1969?

9 SD: This is 1968, probably late 1968 and early '69.

10 RV: What was your draft status?

11 SD: When I dropped out of school it became, what is it? 1-A. I received a draft
12 notice in I think it was March of '69.

13 RV: What did you think when you got that?

14 SD: 'Here we go.'

15 RV: I mean, were you expecting it?

16 SD: Yes. I knew it was just a matter of time. I had some friends who had gotten
17 drafted. I had a lot of friends who were trying to talk me into going to Canada.

18 RV: Really?

19 SD: Yes.

20 RV: Why didn't you go?

21 SD: I just couldn't picture myself avoiding the draft. It would have, I think, really
22 been a slap in the face to my parents.

23 RV: Did you feel a duty to your country?

24 SD: Yeah I did. I guess I was brought up that way. We were a pretty red, white,
25 and blue family. I remember getting into arguments with my dad about demonstrators. I
26 don't remember where they were; maybe it was during the '68 convention in Chicago
27 where the police went after the demonstrators in the street. I was all upset that the
28 students were getting beat up and my dad said, 'Well they shouldn't be there in the first
29 place.' We had quite a little, 20-minute argument. I still wasn't...I don't think I was
30 convinced that the war was wrong in '68 or '69. I wasn't convinced that the people who
31 were, I didn't have a lot of high regard for Johnson, I guess. I was never enamored with

1 Nixon. So I didn't think very highly of those guys. Kind of hard to remember all of this
2 stuff. I wasn't the kind that was going to go and demonstrate against the war.

3 RV: Do you remember who you voted for in '68?

4 SD: Well I wasn't eligible.

5 RV: Oh you weren't 18?

6 SD: Well no.

7 RV: That's right the age hadn't changed.

8 SD: Hadn't changed.

9 RV: So you're going to go to the war now. You're drafted and you're going to
10 report for basic. Did you want to go to a particular branch? Did you want to try and go
11 enlist and do something like that?

12 SD: I remember thinking at the time I'm just going to go and get this over with.
13 I'm going to do my duty and take the shortest route through this thing and get back out
14 and figure out what I'm going to do with my life.

15 RV: Were your parents supportive of you going over, I mean obviously they are
16 going to be worried as parents would be, but how did they feel when they knew you were
17 going to be drafted and eventually you would be in the war zone?

18 SD: I think they were apprehensive. They were scared, but I believe that they felt
19 like if one of their children was going to get drafted then it was their duty to go. It was a
20 strange summer to get drafted. I lived in, I was constantly back and forth visiting with
21 friends I had still up in Peekskill. We rode over to Woodstock for an afternoon to see all
22 of that.

23 RV: During the festival?

24 SD: During the festival.

25 RV: Oh yeah, what was it like?

26 SD: Muddy.

27 RV: (Laughter)

28 SD: Wet.

29 RV: Right.

1 SD: You know you could see the stage way down there. We had to hike like ten
2 miles to get there. The roads were jammed and packed. Once we got there we only stayed
3 there a few hours and turned around and left because it was mess, I thought.

4 RV: Did you hear any music?

5 SD: I heard some but I don't remember who was down there. I think it was Richie
6 Havens.

7 RV: Well that's interesting. So you were actually at the Woodstock Festival.

8 SD: Yes. And a few minutes later I was getting my haircut.

9 RV: Right. So where are you going to report to? Where were you ordered to go?

10 SD: I got my draft notice to be inducted in Philadelphia. Actually I was drafted,
11 my draft board was in Peekskill but the orders came for me to show up in Philadelphia.

12 RV: And when did you go?

13 SD: I think it was September, early September of '69.

14 RV: And this is the U.S. Army.

15 SD: U.S. Army.

16 RV: Right. Where did you go for basic?

17 SD: Well first they sent us down after we were inducted. The induction process, I
18 remember they pulled like six of us outside before the induction and they said 'We're
19 drafting into the Marines this morning. One of you six guys is going to be a Marine, any
20 volunteers?'

21 RV: Really?

22 SD: Yes.

23 RV: How did they pick the six of you?

24 SD: They took the fourth guy alphabetically.

25 RV: (Laughter) Okay.

26 SD: And he went out crying.

27 RV: Oh wow.

28 SD: From what we heard, they don't treat drafted Marines as well as they treat
29 guys who volunteered.

30 RV: Right. Did you have any desire to be a Marine?

31 SD: No.

1 RV: Right because you wanted to kind of get...

2 SD: I wanted to get the responsibility done and over with.

3 RV: Right. So when you're inducted, where do they send you?

4 SD: First went to Ft. Bragg where I took a whole battery of tests and originally I
5 think I was suppose to go to basic there, but they ran out of room for us and so they sent a
6 couple of bus loads of us down to Ft. Jackson, South Carolina.

7 RV: Now I guess that was a bit of a cultural shock for you.

8 SD: Yes.

9 RV: Tell me about what North Carolina and South Carolina were like for a boy
10 from the...

11 SD: Well I knew some of that because I still had a lot of relatives in southern
12 Indiana. I don't know if you have traveled through southern Indiana, which is, in my
13 mind, more like Kentucky then Indiana.

14 RV: Yes, it's very rural.

15 SD: Very rural and a lot of Southern accents. So it reminded me of where my dad
16 grew up in Loogootee, Indiana. I don't think I was as shocked as some of the other guys
17 that were with me on the trip.

18 RV: So tell me about basic training. What was it like? What do you remember?

19 SD: Up at 4:30, 5 a.m. after coming from the environment I was coming from
20 where you would go to work at 9 or 8:30 or something. Getting up and doing PT at dawn
21 was different. The drill sergeant seemed like they were in your face all the time. They
22 were trying to, you know like the book said; they were trying to get you to think like a
23 soldier as opposed to a civilian.

24 RV: Were these guys Vietnam Vets, Steve?

25 SD: Yes, some of them were. At least a couple of them I met. I thought that, you
26 know, looking back on it you know I think in their hearts they were really trying to get
27 you ready in case you were sent to Vietnam so that you would be as prepared as you
28 could be when you got there, particularly some of the instructors who were out. You
29 know you marched different places during the day to learn different, how to operate
30 different weapons or whatever. That was particularly the case, not so much in basic but
31 when you got to AIT, which for me was Advanced Infantry Training, those guys really

1 you could tell they wanted you paying attention and if you weren't...they were in your
2 face but I think they were in their face because they realize most of you guys are not
3 going to Germany. You're going to Vietnam.

4 RV: So did you adapt well to military life at basic?

5 SD: I guess I adapted as well as anybody. You know I didn't have any real run-ins
6 with any of the sergeants. I didn't have any problem marching in cadence. I did well on
7 the rifle range. Somewhere along the line the process started the...and this would happen
8 to me every once in a while. They would take a group of three or four of us and take us
9 into the mess hall and try to convince us to enlist for another year and make us into
10 warrant officers and want to send us to Officer Candidate School because I guess I had
11 done well on the aptitude test. The aptitude test that you took when you first put on your
12 uniform.

13 RV: When you were at Bragg?

14 SD: When I was at Bragg, right.

15 RV: What were your thoughts on that? Were you still committed to kind of
16 getting your enlistment over with or...

17 SD: You know I thought about it a couple of times. About being a helicopter
18 pilot, I thought that might be cool. I was in a commitment of, I have forgotten what it was
19 but it just seemed at the time like a long term. I was going to have to be in the Army for
20 six years and I thought, 'Man I just don't see myself doing this for six years.' So I just
21 kept on staying in the course of, 'I'm going to do my duty and get this done and be a
22 good soldier and go home.'

23 RV: What would you say was the most difficult thing about Basic Training for
24 you?

25 SD: Lack of sleep. (Laughter) I don't know, it just always seemed like you were,
26 that you never got enough sleep. I guess that prepares you for when you get into a combat
27 situation, because once I got to Vietnam if you're out in the field. You would be dealing
28 with sleep deprivation all the time.

29 RV: Right. What was the easiest thing to you in Basic?

30 SD: Probably a weapons training, although I was never a hunter as a kid. I grew
31 up in the country and I guess also the patrol stuff, learning to read maps, Peekskill was

1 kind of a rural area at the time I grew up. I was always in the woods. I was a boy scout,
2 an explorer scout. I was with a scout troop who we always, you know we did a lot of
3 canoeing, canoe rides down the Susquehanna, the Delaware River, a lot of outdoor
4 camping. I didn't have a problem with sleeping outside, pitching tents, dealing with
5 reading trail maps that a lot of other guys had a tougher time getting used to.

6 RV: Were you a leader, Steve, or were you kind of trying to blend in and stay
7 under the radar?

8 SD: You know at that time, just trying to stay under the radar. I have forgotten
9 what they made the leaders and the companies you were in in the barracks. I wasn't a
10 barracks leader or any of that stuff. I was just low profile.

11 RV: How did you get along with everybody else there?

12 SD: I got along with everybody pretty good. I mean I don't remember getting into
13 any fights with anybody or anything. Everybody in the barracks sometime or another are
14 going to get cross with somebody, but I got along with pretty much everybody.

15 RV: Okay. Your family still okay with everything going on?

16 SD: Yes.

17 RV: So at the end of basic you're going to get an AIT. Were you selected
18 infantry? Did you request it?

19 SD: No, I was selected.

20 RV: How did that happen? Were you kind of trying to get away from that? I mean
21 that is something that's going to dictate your future in Vietnam. That you're going to be a
22 rifleman versus doing something else.

23 SD: As I remember, oh man, I think it was after we graduated from basic. You
24 know you do this graduation ceremony. God, I had forgotten about that. Or maybe it was
25 just before, but somewhere along the line you're in formation and they start peeling you
26 off, handing you a piece of paper and peeling you off to certain trucks that are going to
27 take you to a different part of the base or you're packing up to leave to go to some other
28 fort someplace for whatever specialized training. So that's when I got handed the sheet
29 that said that I was going to advanced infantry training.

30 RV: How did you feel?

1 SD: I guess that I had somewhere in the back of my head had kind of resolved
2 that there was more probability that that was going to happen than not. So I guess I
3 wasn't really surprised.

4 RV: Where did you go for AIT?

5 SD: I stayed at Ft. Jackson.

6 RV: Okay so you stayed right there.

7 SD: I just moved down the road.

8 RV: How long was your advanced? Was it nine weeks?

9 SD: Yeah nine, ten weeks, something like that.

10 RV: Tell me about what they taught you. How did it differ from basic?

11 SD: Well the drill sergeants weren't in your face the way they were in basic. You
12 know you were a soldier now. I mean you weren't some trainee. I think that there was
13 some you know, I mean it was still tough and it was still very disciplined, but it wasn't in
14 your face disciplines like it is in basic.

15 RV: Right.

16 SD: I think as I said earlier that that's when, you know you go through some of
17 the same training that you're in in basic, only it's a little more in depth and a little more
18 intense. I mean you learn how to strip down a rifle when you're in basic but when you're
19 in AIT they expect you to practically do it blindfolded and to really know the weapons
20 that you're going to be utilizing inside and out. You spend a lot more time on the firing
21 range. You really spend a lot of time with claymores and those kinds of things.

22 RV: Were you comfortable with all of the weapons?

23 SD: Yes. I never had a problem with any of the weapons that I was trained on.
24 There were some that I knew I was going to be more comfortable with than others.

25 RV: Such as?

26 SD: Well I really couldn't see myself, if I'm out defending myself I couldn't see
27 myself carrying an M-79. I would much rather have an M-16 in my hand.

28 RV: What kind of field tactics were you learning? What were they drilling you on
29 there?

1 SD: I learned a lot about camouflage, a lot about what was it called, what did they
2 call it, concealment techniques-looking for the right kind of cover versus concealment.
3 Learning how to read trails, read maps, how to spot booby traps.

4 RV: I guess that's where a lot of their, I would imagine where they brought in
5 what their, the instructors experience in Vietnam. Did they specifically say, here's what
6 the Viet Cong... here's what to look for?

7 SD: Well they had examples of different booby traps that the VC were utilizing at
8 the time, everything from punji sticks to trip wires to holes dug in a ground that you
9 would fall into, those kinds of things. And what to look for in terms of when you're
10 walking a trail, what to step on, what not to step on. We did a lot more training at night.

11 RV: Did they teach you how to ambush, things like that?

12 SD: Yes, those kinds of things.

13 RV: How about, did they teach you how to walk point?

14 SD: I don't remember that being part of the curriculum. (Laughter)

15 RV: (Laughter) Tell me what you're feeling. You're going through this and you
16 know that all of this is leading to me shipping off to a war where I'm really going to be
17 doing this for real. What's that like? Is this something you even think about or is it way
18 kind of in the back of your minds?

19 SD: You know it's...what's the word I'm searching for? Surrealistic. You're
20 almost kind of outside yourself watching yourself go through this, really not believing
21 that it's happening sometimes.

22 RV: Right. Is it scary?

23 SD: Well yeah. It seems like you're very apprehensive. Looking back, I guess
24 you're more apprehensive about the unknown than anything else. Because there's no
25 way, even though you're all these guys are describing how you...what you need to do in
26 different kinds of situations. There is no way that they can describe it to the point where
27 you really understand what's going to happen here.

28 RV: Right. Was there any excitement?

29 SD: I don't remember anybody being excited about the possibility of going into
30 combat or going to Vietnam.

1 RV: So all this stuff that these Marines have been telling me is a bunch of bunk?
2 (Laughter)
3 SD: Yeah.
4 RV: They can't wait to go over and kill a Commie for mommy.
5 SD: I never bought into that.
6 RV: Anything else about Advanced that you want to talk about? Any incidents
7 that happened before you graduated and get ready to go?
8 SD: No. I think it was pretty, what I went through was probably pretty normal.
9 RV: This is 1969? Or are you into '70 now?
10 SD: Late '69 and it may have been, I can't remember. Did I go home for
11 Christmas or not? I think I was and then I went back to the base and finished up a couple
12 of weeks and then I had a week's leave or something like that and I shipped over in early
13 February of '70.
14 RV: Okay. Why don't we go ahead and stop here, Steve? This seems to be a good
15 place where we can pause and continue at another time.
16 SD: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Stephen W. Dant
Conducted by Richard Burks Verrone, Ph.D.
March 9, 2005
Transcribed by Brooke Tomlin

1 RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history interview with
2 Mr. Stephen Dant. Today is March 9, 2005. I'm again in Lubbock, Texas in the Special
3 Collections Library Interview Room. Mr. Dant is in Colorado Springs. It is about 8:23
4 a.m. Central Standard Time. Mr. Dant, why don't we continue with where we were? Tell
5 me a little bit about before you went over to Vietnam and what you were feeling. You
6 had some time off before you're deployed, what did you do, did you go back home?

7 SD: Yes I went back home, visited some friends, went to a few parties, spent
8 whatever money I had in my pocket.

9 RV: What were your friends saying to you, do you recall?

10 SD: As I remember they were just...I don't remember exactly what was said but
11 you know, wishing me a lot of luck and I think they were apprehensive and a little afraid
12 for me.

13 RV: Did they know you were going to be a rifleman basically?

14 SD: Yes, they knew I was infantry.

15 RV: How were you feeling?

16 SD: About the same. I resigned to the situation. You know I didn't want to go but
17 I kind of wanted to go and get it over with.

18 RV: Did your parents have anything to say especially about it? I can only image
19 they were upset and worried.

20 SD: Yes, my parents are quiet people to begin with but they were even more,
21 seemed to be more quiet during this period. They took me to the airport, saw me off on a

1 plane, I mean we just kind of sat there and looked at each other for about 15, 20 minutes
2 it seemed like. Then lots of hugs and kisses and I was off.

3 RV: And you flew from where?

4 SD: I flew from Philadelphia to Seattle, Washington, then was in Ft. Lewis,
5 Washington for a few days. I think two or three days. I remember seeing one of the
6 greatest renditions of *Jail House Rock* that I can ever remember. Some guy was on a...the
7 barracks were two-floor barracks and I don't know some guy from, I met him later, he
8 was from Tennessee or Kentucky or somewhere in there. We were all standing there in a
9 chow line or something and he stepped out onto this balcony or this walkway that got you
10 down to the ground, maybe it was a fire escape, and just had a broom there and started
11 singing into the broom handle Elvis' *Jail House Rock*. We gave him a standing ovation. It
12 kind of lightened up the time that we were all there.

13 RV: What was the mood like overall with everybody there right before leaving?

14 SD: You know it was serious, I know I keep using the word apprehensive but it
15 just fits so well. It was strange, it was a deployment stop for the Army but it was also a
16 place where you came back into the States, when you came back from Vietnam. In fact
17 that's where, when I came back from Vietnam, I came back through Ft. Lewis. Every
18 once in a while you would run into some guys who had been here and I mean they
19 wouldn't really talk to you. They just had this look like they had been there and done
20 that. And really didn't want to have much to do with the guys that were going over, it
21 didn't seem.

22 RV: Did you all want to talk and ask what can we expect, how was it?

23 SD: You know I think that they would have thought our questions were stupid.

24 (Laughter)

25 RV: So tell me about the flight over, what was that like?

26 SD: You know I really don't remember much of the flight over. I just remember
27 getting on a plane, and I basically remember landing. Maybe I slept a lot on the plane. I
28 do remember that we had one stop. We stopped in Guam and refueled and had some
29 lunch or dinner there. We were there for probably a couple of hours and then we're back
30 on a plane and the next thing I knew we were landing in Cam Ranh Bay.

31 RV: Wow. You had heard of Cam Ranh Bay I assume beforehand.

1 SD: Yes.

2 RV: What did it look like from air? Was it at night or in the morning?

3 SD: No it was day, I think it was about mid-day.

4 RV: Do you remember what it looked like?

5 SD: Yes. I remember flying over it and seeing the beach and ocean and then

6 heading a little inland as I remember and landing on the tarmac. I guess I remember more

7 about landing than anything because we all...I remember talking to guys thinking, 'Well

8 you know, we're unarmed.' (Laughter)

9 RV: You were really thinking that. 'We're landing in a war and we don't have

10 weapons.'

11 SD: I don't have a weapon anywhere near me. You have no expectations of what

12 it's going to be like when you land there and as far as we all knew as soon as we get off

13 the plane we're going to start getting shot at. But that didn't turn out to be the case. It was

14 a huge base and then we came down off of the plane and got onto some buses and headed

15 over to an area where you kind of checked in. Where you handed them your orders and

16 they gave you other orders and got you situated for the first couple of days you were

17 there.

18 RV: Did you remember what it felt like when you stepped off the plane and onto

19 the tarmac? What were your first impressions of the country itself?

20 SD: That it was very hot, very muggy, and it smelled weird.

21 RV: What did it smell like?

22 SD: You know kind of a cross between what I had smelled in Guam I guess in

23 terms of tropics and you know I got my first whiff of burning human excrement.

24 RV: (Laughter)

25 SD: What the hell is that? Then people tell you. You go, 'You're kidding.'

26 RV: The shit patrol.

27 SD: The shit patrol, yeah. You know they set up outhouses around and they would

28 cut up oil drums and sit them under the toilet seat and then somebody would have the

29 duty of pulling those oil drums full of shit out once or twice a day and they would pour

30 kerosene and mix it in and set it on fire. I guess the ground wasn't very conducive to

1 building any kind of sewer system and if you tried to dig some type of, what's the term
2 I'm searching for?

3 RV: A trench or a hole?

4 SD: Yes. I mean you couldn't dig it very deep because I think the water would
5 burble up. Cam Ranh Bay was probably five feet above sea level. So they had to deal
6 with it some way, so they burnt it.

7 RV: So you check in and you stay there for what did you say a day or so?

8 SD: I think I was in Cam Ranh Bay for about four or five days. I think that's right.

9 RV: What were you waiting on?

10 SD: I was waiting on orders of where I was going to go. I mean it was kind
11 of...you know I hadn't been...that's where they decide what unit you're going to go into.
12 And it could be really anywhere in the country. I walked a couple of days of guard duty
13 in Cam Ranh Bay. I remember they gave me a, to walk guard duty, they gave me an M-1
14 rifle. I had never fired or seen an M-1 rifle until they handed me one that day. I had
15 always trained with an M-16. I'm going, 'What the hell am I going to do with this thing?'

16 RV: This was your first weapon issued?

17 SD: Yes.

18 RV: (Laughter) Okay. Did they tell you how to walk guard duty?

19 SD: Well you know you had been trained in walking guard duty, you know we
20 walked a lot of guard duty in basic and AIT and I was just walking a perimeter inside of a
21 perimeter so it wasn't like I was walking the very outside of the perimeter. So I think they
22 gave us that duty to give us something to do more than anything else, to keep us out of
23 trouble.

24 SD: Any incidents, anything happen during those few days?

25 RV: No.

26 SD: Okay. Did you hear the war going on?

27 RV: No.

28 SD: Okay. I don't think the whole time I was there I don't think I heard one siren.
29 I don't remember any incoming. I just remember being very sun burnt.

30 RV: Oh yeah?

1 SD: Well you know I was pretty much raised in the north. It gets hot and muggy
2 in Indiana and upstate New York and Delaware but nothing like the tropics of Vietnam.
3 When I went to basic training in South Carolina, it started in September so I went there
4 mostly during the fall. It took some getting used to the heat and humidity.

5 RV: So tell me when you finally got your orders which unit were you assigned to
6 and where did you go?

7 SD: I was assigned to Charlie Company, the 5th of the 46th battalion, 198th brigade
8 in the Americal Division.

9 RV: And where did they send you?

10 SD: They sent me to Chu Lai. I took a, I don't remember this but I'm sure I took
11 some type of airplane transport, C-whatever it was.

12 RV: What was Chu Lai like?

13 SD: Smaller version of Cam Ranh Bay. It was right on the South China Sea. The
14 area really is, as I look back on it, was really a beautiful area. There were mountains to
15 the west and white sandy beach coastline. The base was surround by barbwire and lots of
16 bunkers and you know it looked like an Army base and I think there was a, I don't know
17 if it was the Marines or the Navy had a squadron of fighters there and there was some
18 other aircraft there as well. I think that's correct.

19 RV: Was this your permanent base or how long were you there?

20 SD: I was only there briefly to kind of sign into the battalion and then went to the
21 company headquarters there at the base and I mean in pretty quick order, I don't even
22 know if I was there a night, I was on a deuce and a half heading down Highway One to
23 somewhere near... I have forgotten if it was Bayonet or Gator to meet up with the
24 company. I think I spent a couple, again I don't remember if it was Gator or Bayonet but
25 I spent a couple of nights there waiting for the company to come in. That's when I first
26 saw some incoming. We got mortared that night. There were dinks in the wire. That was
27 pretty exciting.

28 RV: Tell me about the mortar experience. Is this your first kind of taste of the
29 war?

30 SD: Yes. You could hear the 'thunk' of the mortar round coming out of the tube
31 and you knew what it was because you had heard that sound back in the States when you

1 were training and who knew where it was going to drop and that's where everybody just
2 kind of, at least I was the first time out, kind of holding my breath. I soon learned that the
3 Vietnamese weren't very good shots with those things but they did manage to get a
4 couple of rounds inside the base that night. I know that they had a couple of VC in the
5 wire. I think they got off one satchel of explosives at some bunker at some place but I
6 don't remember anybody getting hurt.

7 RV: Well from there what happened? Where did you go?

8 SD: From there I got on another truck and headed up the road a few more miles
9 and there was my company standing on the side of the road of Highway One. So I got put
10 in a squad, a platoon and a squad and we humped down the road about...oh, I don't know
11 probably a couple of clicks down this trail and set up a perimeter for the evening and off
12 we went.

13 RV: Steve, how did the company receive you? What was it like when you stepped
14 off the truck and walked over and joined them?

15 SD: Everybody was I thought pretty quiet but friendly. You know, 'Welcome
16 aboard.' There was a sergeant that kind of took me under his wing. He had been there for
17 a while. His name was Olsen as I remember. He was from I think Wisconsin. He said,
18 'Stick close to me for the first few days here till you figure out what's going on.' That
19 was very helpful.

20 RV: I imagine that made you feel a little bit better.

21 SD: Yes a little better. I had somebody watching out for me that I didn't do
22 something stupid the first few days that I was there.

23 RV: I assume you were issued your M-16 at this point.

24 SD: Yeah M-16 [actually I was issued an M-16 and ammo in Chu Lai.] and I was
25 carrying a couple of hand grenades and everybody was assigned in a squad to carry an
26 ammunition belt for the M-60 and canteens and you know the rest of the stuff. I think I
27 had two or three bandoleers of ammunition for my M-16. I probably was carrying...I
28 know off and on I did a claymore. You know everybody kind of divvied stuff out so it
29 was pretty much evenly weighted throughout the squad.

30 RV: They didn't make you carry more since you were new?

31 SD: No, I don't think so. God I couldn't have carried anymore.

1 RV: What did that weigh, all that stuff together?

2 SD: (Laughter) I don't know. I guess it probably weighed around 65 pounds,
3 something like that.

4 RV: Wow.

5 SD: Yeah it's one of the things that people ask me, 'Well what was it like to be in
6 the infantry and to be out in the field?' I would say, 'Well it was a lot of very hard
7 physical work.' Because you're carrying around a 65-pound rucksack and you know
8 carrying a weapon and during those days they made you wear a flak jacket and a steel
9 pot. It was probably 92 degrees and 95% humidity and a lot of the time if you, especially
10 in the Batangan Peninsula where I first was, you know you tried to stay off the trails
11 which means you were walking in rice patties so you were up to your knees in mud with
12 all this weight on you. You know I played high school football, two-a-day work outs,
13 worked in some construction, you know I had done some hard work but I had never
14 worked this hard carrying this much weight through that much crap in all my life.

15 RV: Was it a shock to your system there at first?

16 SD: Yes I thought...a couple of time I was straggling a little bit behind the squad
17 and I began thinking, 'Jesus, I don't know if I'm going to make this.' But you get
18 acclimated and I guess you get toughened up and you know you do what you have to do.
19 I don't know that you ever get used to it but you get better at it, I guess.

20 RV: What else were you carrying besides your weapons and ammo and your steel
21 pot and flak jacket? What else did you have with you?

22 SD: I know I had a bayonet. What else? Some personal belongings, not very
23 many, a wallet, and I carried a couple of quarts of water. I can't remember really
24 anything else.

25 RV: I assume a relatively new uniform.

26 SD: Yeah, the standard poncho liner that everybody used as a blanket at night and
27 as a tent during the day if you were stopped down for something. It's a way to put a
28 couple of sticks and hook it up as a little lean-to tent and get out of the sun.

29 RV: What about food rations?

1 SD: God, I guess I was probably carrying probably one day of rations. You know
2 I really don't remember. I must have been though because you didn't get resupplied
3 every day. I remember carrying water more than I remember carrying rations.

4 RV: How fast would you go through your water?

5 SD: Well you would really if, that's the thing, I would try to, and some guys
6 carried less then I did and I don't know how they did that, but if you were really out
7 humping a lot during the day I tried not to drink more then a quart during the day and
8 save a quart so I could really replenish at night. And when you stopped down at night you
9 would usually find someplace where we could fill up the canteens and throw a lot of
10 tablets in them, which made it taste like shit but you still had water.

11 RV: Tell me about the first few days. What were you feeling? I mean you got this
12 sergeant that's helping you out. Did you stick right by his side?

13 SD: Well I wasn't right by his side but I was no more then one guy away from
14 him, usually following him. We were working the area that was kind of out near My Lai,
15 which is heavily mined, lots of VC. We were on patrol during the day and at night
16 certain squads would go out and set up ambushes or listening posts at night. I didn't have
17 to go and do it. I didn't go out at night for the first few weeks, I don't think, that I was
18 there.

19 RV: Because they didn't allow you?

20 SD: I think they spared me that.

21 RV: What kind of things were they telling you Steve? You said the first night you
22 guys kind of, when you hooked up with them, you went out and you dug in for the night,
23 you set up a defensive perimeter. Were they saying, 'Now here's what you need to be
24 doing, here's what you don't need to be doing,' or were they just not talking, or were they
25 saying 'Just watch and learn.'?

26 SD: They would tell you where to dig your foxhole, how to set up your line of fire
27 but I already pretty much knew that from AIT. A lot of it was the importance of if you're
28 on guard duty and that foxhole is the importance of staying awake. Don't be smoking
29 cigarettes at night, no radios. A lot of guys had radios in the field and they would plug in
30 an earphone. If you got caught doing that you were in a lot of trouble. So you know
31 things like that I guess. Not to be afraid if you really think that there is something out

1 there and you see something don't be afraid to fire off that claymore. Once you did that
2 you can assure that everybody was going to be alive and awake and after it.

3 RV: Did you ever have to do that early on?

4 SD: No. I think I was in the field like three or four days the first time that we got
5 attacked. We set up for a perimeter in the evening and it was just about...oh, it was
6 heading towards dark, twilight. Some VC must have gotten close to our perimeter and
7 threw two or three grenades into the middle of our perimeter. Everybody ducked down
8 and headed for the foxholes. We just kind of RECON by fire for about 30 seconds or so. I
9 remember my sergeant saying to me, 'Well congratulations, you just got your CIB.'

10 RV: (Laughter) What was your reaction?

11 SD: (Laughter) I said, 'I did?'

12 RV: (Laughter)

13 SD: I think I laughed with him.

14 RV: What was that first taste of combat like?

15 SD: Well you know it's confusion, because when something like that happens
16 everybody kind of, at least I did, you know the hair on the back of your head goes straight
17 up. I guess I probably froze for a second or so and trying to figure out, 'Okay, what do I
18 do?' You know then you're looking for that foxhole, that place where you're supposed to
19 be setting up that defensive position. After you go through that the first time and you
20 react the way you're supposed to react, that's somewhat of getting a... a little bit of
21 getting a monkey off your back because you never know how you're going to react to it
22 until it happens. Then once you see yourself react accordingly or the way you're
23 supposed to, you feel a little better. You go, 'Okay, I guess I know what I'm doing or I
24 know a little bit about what I'm suppose to be doing.'

25 RV: Were you pleased with the way you reacted?

26 SD: Yeah I guess. I think it built my confidence level a little bit. I don't know
27 about pleased, but it was a confidence builder.

28 RV: Well Steve tell me after, this is after the first few days you said out in the
29 field?

30 SD: Right.

1 RV: Describe for me what a typical day was like for you as you're out there in the
2 field doing this. What would you all do?

3 SD: Well the first month I was out there it was you would be up in the morning
4 just as the sun was coming up, that's when everybody was getting up and getting after it.
5 Almost every day we would be on a patrol, some type of sweep or some type of search
6 and destroy mission.

7 RV: Was it company size?

8 SD: Sometimes it was company sized and sometimes it was platoon sized. The
9 only time we really operated as a squad was if we came upon something and you wanted
10 to check something out a few hundred yards away you would send out a squad of guys
11 and have them report back on radio or come back into the platoon or company strength.
12 Or you would send out a squad of guys on a night ambush. Daytime missions were
13 usually in platoon or company size wise. Batangan Peninsula was I think I said earlier
14 just full of VC. It was heavily, heavily mined. I mean we found mines every day. We had
15 guys, seemed like every few days we would have somebody wounded who had hit a
16 mine. Some of them, most of them weren't all that serious but enough that they would
17 have to sent back to the rear. So everybody was just very uptight, nervous, and getting
18 angry.

19 RV: What do you mean?

20 SD: Well you would come into these villages and you would see women and
21 children and old men. You wouldn't see any men between the ages of probably 15 and
22 50. So you know it was a VC village and you knew that these people were...what they
23 were doing...what was happening at night was very much different then what was
24 happening in the daytime. This was the same area of operation of Lieutenant Calley. So
25 we were feeling the same frustration as his troopers were. We were handling it a lot better
26 then he did. There was a lot of tension and apprehension and frustration in dealing with
27 the people out there. I really didn't understand tactically why we would let this go on.
28 Why wouldn't we just take all these folks, gather them up, get them back to the rear,
29 ascertain whether they were good guys or bad guys and then let us go through this area in
30 a sweep and assume that anybody that were left out there were bad guys.

31 RV: Would you all talk about that or is this something on reflection?

1 SD: I think we used to talk about that. It was part of the frustration. We knew they
2 were VC and that we're not allowed to do anything about it in many cases.

3 RV: Would you search the village?

4 SD: Sure. And find tunnels. And sometimes, not often but every once in a while
5 we find ammunition and we would fire that up.

6 RV: Tell me how you search a village. Like you walk in the main road and what
7 happens? Or what you guys did, how you all did it. Not necessarily the textbook way but
8 just how it happened for you.

9 SD: Well if you would come across a village and you had just been shot at and
10 somebody had disappeared back towards this village you would come on the village. You
11 would be coming up in a single file up to the village and then you would spread out so
12 you would kind of sweep through it on line if you would, pushing all the people in front
13 of you. So you would get them all into one spot so you would have some control then.
14 You didn't want anybody behind you. Then you would start going through the hooches
15 and seeing what was in there. Sometimes you didn't find anything. You would just find
16 food or tools, supplies, those kinds of things for farming the rice paddies. Everyone once
17 in a while you would find some tunnel that lead to who knows where.

18 RV: You wouldn't go down in it?

19 SD: Well, we had some tunnel rats. (Laughter) I remember this one guy, I mean I
20 thought he was absolutely nuts to go down there. You would hand him a .45 and he
21 would crawl down in there. More often than not he would bring out something, some
22 satchel charge, or AK-47 or bunch of unexploded mortars or something.

23 RV: What would happen when you find things like this? You suspected the
24 village was VC but now you got some proof that they are doing something against you.

25 SD: I never remember burning a village down in the Batangan Peninsula. I
26 remember burning one up in the mountains later, a few months later. As I recall we
27 would, if we found the weapons we would take them back or we would get somebody
28 from ordnance to blow them up or we'd attempt and sometimes ordnance would come in
29 behind us and attempt to blow up the tunnels. Sometimes depending on what we found,
30 we would round up some people in the village and send them back to the rear for
31 questioning. Beyond that it's kind of hazy what would happen.

1 RV: What was morale like during your first few weeks there and did that change?

2 SD: I don't think it was high because everybody was so tense. You know, kind of
3 ticked at how this whole operation was going. So there was kind of a disgruntled spirit, I
4 guess. It really you know, a lot of that was caused by if every two or three days or so
5 somebody in the unit was getting wounded guys would get you know, they would be
6 more fearful they're going to be the next to step on a mine. They would be ticked that
7 their friend had got hurt and there is nobody to shoot at to retaliate against.

8 RV: Right. I hear this myth, people hear this myth that you didn't get close to new
9 guys first of all because they didn't know what they were doing and they likely would get
10 killed or hurt quicker but tell me how bonds form. And was that myth true?

11 SD: I think there is a little bit of truth to it. In the first few days that you're there I
12 think you know I think people are kind of wanting to know who this guy is. They want to
13 know that you're going to have your act together and you're not going to be some kind of
14 jerk or cause them to get hurt. Once people figure out that you halfway have your act
15 together and it really doesn't, in my mind, I don't think it took that long to get acclimated
16 to the process. Within a week or two I thought I had a pretty good relationship with most
17 of the guys in my squad and with the other squads in the platoon. So I guess there is a
18 little truth to that but I think it's exaggerated. If on the other hand, and I saw this happen,
19 you get somebody who comes out to the squad or comes out to the platoon and this guy is
20 dumber than a rock or just has no common sense you're: A, trying to stay away from him
21 and B, you're trying to get him sent back to the rear.

22 RV: How would you get that done?

23 SD: Call the first sergeant and tell him to get his ass out of here. Find him a rear
24 job someplace. (Laughter)

25 RV: And you were able to get that done?

26 SD: I saw that happen a couple of times. It didn't get done by me, but it got done
27 by somebody. Either one of the squad sergeants would call the top sergeant back at the
28 rear and say, 'Man, you know, who are you sending us here? Get him out of here.' That
29 didn't happen very often but I saw it happen a couple of times during the five, six,
30 however many months I was out in the field.

1 RV: What were those relationships like overall for you while you were there out
2 in the field, I mean is that the most important thing motivating you or is it the policy of
3 the United States, or is it your own survival?

4 SD: I think that your own survival is dependent upon survival of the squad, the
5 survival of the platoon. I don't know if Vietnam was any different than any other war,
6 you know, in some of the stuff I've read. You fight for each other as much as anything
7 else.

8 RV: Tell me about your supplies, were you able to get adequate supplies and
9 resupplied when you needed it? Did you ever have to go without for a while?

10 SD: I think there were a couple of times where for whatever reason the hueys
11 were grounded and we might not get resupplied for like a day past or two days past when
12 we would normally get resupplied but I don't ever remember anything more than that.
13 One time when we were pinned down in a valley out west of Chu Lai and then we had all
14 kinds of problems. But the worst part of the Batangan Peninsula was walking the mine
15 fields and then either having, being mortared every night or I remember one night we had
16 a number of...a pretty big rocket attack on the company that really, that was the only
17 night when I was out at the Batangan Peninsula where some of those rounds from the
18 rockets really got close.

19 RV: To you or your squad?

20 SD: Well they got inside the perimeter. It was close enough where it shook the
21 earth. I mean I was down in a hole in the ground and that hole was about equivalent of a
22 six or seven on the Richter scale.

23 RV: Wow. I can only image that was a bit scary.

24 SD: Everybody was scared that night and we had dinks in a wire. We had a
25 number of kills I think that night. Them, not us, and everybody was pretty ticked off the
26 next morning.

27 RV: At the enemy?

28 SD: At the enemy.

29 RV: And when you were ticked off did you want to go up...

1 SD: You wanted them to stand and fight but in typical guerilla warfare I mean
2 their tactics were just the opposite and I understood that. For them to stand and fight they
3 were going to get hurt.

4 RV: Right. Did you all understand that?

5 SD: I don't know if everybody understood that. I had read enough American
6 History to know that the Americans were successful a lot because they hid behind the
7 trees and shot at the guys in the red coats. That wasn't always the case in every battle in
8 the American Revolution but it frustrated the hell out of the British on a lot of occasions.
9 So I understood the tactics that the VC were trying to use. You had to work hard to try to
10 flush them out. I'm not sure that everybody in the unit understood that but I was talking
11 to some guys that were there at the time, you know. There were guys that knew what was
12 going on in that regard.

13 RV: Steve, tell me about the mines. You said this was perhaps the biggest
14 problem, something that you encountered everyday. It was a constant threat. How would
15 you find a mine, what did you look for?

16 SD: You're looking for...I didn't walk a lot, I didn't walk at any point out on the
17 Batangan Peninsula.

18 RV: Why not?

19 SD: I was still a...an FNG.

20 RV: And they didn't quite trust you out there.

21 SD: No, most of the guys who were walking point had been out in the bush for a
22 couple of months. I think there was some trust built up. I had their trust but I didn't have
23 their trust enough that you were going to put somebody who had only been in country a
24 few weeks out walking point.

25 RV: Right.

26 SD: That just wasn't going to happen. It would be stupid on their part and it
27 would be stupid on my part to even think about doing that.

28 RV: Did these point walkers, did they volunteer for this or were they assigned?

29 SD: No, most of them I think kind of accepted the position I guess is the best way
30 to put it. I don't remember when I did walk point volunteering for it but I just thought
31 that I was probably the best person for it.

1 RV: Go ahead and tell me then about the mines, locating them.

2 SD: There are two guys really that are walking point. There's one guy who is out
3 in front and he's looking down and the guy behind is looking out. So the guy who's
4 looking down is looking at the trail, looking where he's putting his feet, looking for
5 something that is out of order. Something that doesn't belong or something that looks like
6 it's just been moved or looking for a trip wire.

7 RV: Now these are on trails?

8 SD: Mines are almost always on trails, which is why if you get to a point where
9 you go, 'Geez we're in the middle of a mine field, get the hell off the trail and get out into
10 either the bush and cut your way through it or get out into the rice paddies and walk
11 through the rice paddies.' There's never really an easy way to set up a mine in a rice
12 paddy. But that made it a lot tougher going and you weren't going to get to where you
13 were supposed to be in maybe the time you were suppose to be there. So if you could,
14 you tried to walk the trail. If it got impossible to walk the trail you got off the trail and
15 walked the rice paddies.

16 RV: So these two are they within sight of you guys, are they that far out where
17 you can't see them?

18 SD: They are within sight. I would say the next guy behind them is probably 15
19 yards, 20 yards and these guys are probably...one looking at the ground and the next guy
20 is probably ten feet behind him.

21 RV: I would image that's a pretty hairy task.

22 SD: Yes that's a little hairy. And the hairiest spot I ever saw with regard to mines
23 was out in the Batangan Peninsula. I mean you ran into mines every place else but
24 nothing like what was out there.

25 RV: You're talking about one about every 100 yards or at least one a day?

26 SD: At least one a day. Sometimes there would be it would seem like every, and I
27 wasn't up walking point but you remember stopping and everybody would stand still and
28 that means we found something else. That might happen you know several times in an
29 hour.

30 RV: Right.

1 SD: At that point you start saying okay we're probably going to get off the trail
2 here and I got to hump this damn thing through a rice paddy.

3 RV: I can see where you all would get pretty pissed off at the enemy. You want to
4 say okay whoever is making us do this I want to take them out.

5 SD: And it's hot as hell and it's just you know, you're tired and you know you've
6 been up half the night every night that you're out there. Sleep deprivation is just kind of
7 normal.

8 RV: What keeps you going? In that kind of situation what keeps you going
9 instead of saying the hell with this I just can't do it anymore.

10 SD: Well it's not like you have a lot of choice. (Laughter)

11 RV: But civilians listening to this they are going to be like, 'My God, that just
12 sounds like hell on earth.'

13 SD: Well you're in the Army, you're under orders, and there's guys around you
14 who are depending on you. I know that sounds a little hokey but I mean, that's how it is.
15 You know I've never been so dependent on a group of people, a group of guys in my life
16 I mean with the exception of my wife than those guys who you fought with in Vietnam.

17 RV: The injuries from the mines would these mainly from the two up front or
18 could it be something, someone back in the line?

19 SD: Mostly up in the front. You know occasionally the point guys would miss
20 something or it would be something that was slightly off the trail. That's what you tried
21 to do as you were following these guys. You try to almost follow in their footsteps. It
22 narrowed the path as much as you could because maybe if you got off two feet or three
23 feet to the right there was something that they missed and somebody would hit that and
24 an explosion would happen. I saw that happen a couple of times but I don't remember
25 any more than that. It didn't happen very often.

26 RV: Tell me about the basic differences between the daytime and nighttime. You
27 hear all this stuff about that they ruled the night and you guys ruled the day. What was
28 the actual reality of the situation there?

29 SD: I don't know that I would say that they ruled the night but some of the
30 advantages that we had we lost during the night. The odds evened more at night; let me
31 put it that way.

1 RV: How so?

2 SD: Well because the loss of sight. I mean it's really that simple and they did
3 know the area better than we knew it. So we took in more defensive posture at night. The
4 only time that they could take the offense was at night with the exception of one time that
5 I was there. In my mind even though they were taking the offense, they were up against
6 some pretty solid forces that were dug in. As many times as you hear about you know VC
7 and they got inside the compound and so on and so forth. I mean most times when they
8 did that, they weren't very successful. They ended up being killed and the amount of
9 damage that they did versus, the amount of lives that they lost you know I...I was never
10 in a situation where I saw the VC or the NVA win a skirmish with the exception of one
11 time and I wasn't there. I was in the rear when my squad got overrun.

12 RV: We'll save that and talk about that when we have a little bit more time. Let
13 me ask you a couple of just basic questions that people want to know about the war, want
14 to know about...this stuff is either perpetuated by movies, by books, or just rumor. Tell
15 me about fragging. Was that ever discussed, did you ever see it, witness it, hear about it?

16 SD: About what?

17 RV: Fragging.

18 SD: Fragging?

19 RV: Yes.

20 SD: You're talking about fellow soldiers?

21 RV: Fellow soldiers killing officers because of you know whatever. Personal
22 reasons or professional stuff. You know, 'I don't know what to go back out there the next
23 day and this guy is going to make me so I'm going to take him out.' That's a basic
24 scenario.

25 SD: I remember it being talked about a couple of times but I don't ever remember
26 it happening.

27 RV: When it was talked about was it just more of a joke?

28 SD: No, you would be pretty pissed off at either a sergeant or at a lieutenant or
29 captain who you felt was out to make a name for himself, who was more gung-ho than he
30 was smart. You know, I don't know this for sure but I remember having a conversation
31 about how some lieutenant, and it wasn't in our company but it was in one of the other

1 companies in the battalion, I guess woke up in the morning with a hand grenade down at
2 the bottom of his poncho liner. That's what I heard.

3 RV: As a message.

4 SD: As a message

5 RV: What about tension between those who were enlisted and maybe career
6 military, the officers, or even the lower ranks between those who are drafted. Did you see
7 any tension there, any problems?

8 SD: No. Maybe there was some in the rear but once you got to the field all of that
9 disappeared in a hurry. I thought I had good relationships with my platoon lieutenant who
10 later became company commander and most of the sergeants that were my squad leader,
11 with the exception of one. So I thought that those guys all pretty much had their act
12 together and were pretty good leaders.

13 RV: What about tension between those in the field and those in the rear?

14 SD: We saw some of that. (Laughter)

15 RV: Tell me about that.

16 SD: (Laughter)

17 RV: You know Steve that's almost a positive answer almost every time.

18 SD: Well we were almost in a riot. We came back to the rear on a three-day stand
19 down after being out in the field for I don't know how many weeks, you lose track. We
20 were tired and weary and wanted some beer and steaks. We had just gotten back. We had
21 only been there for about a day and a couple of our guys were over at the EM club, there
22 was a lot of racial tension in the rear as well. I was back catching a nap at the hooch and I
23 got waken up by a couple of guys in my squad and said, 'What's going on?' He said,
24 'Well,' I've forgotten his name, 'just got the shit kicked out of him by a bunch of black
25 guys in the EM club.' I said, 'Why'd they do that for?' He goes, 'I guess because they
26 can.'

27 RV: This was a racial thing?

28 SD: This was a racial thing. And when I got a rear job I saw a lot of that. Anyway
29 here's a whole company of infantry, guys that had just come down on stand down and
30 they take your weapons away from you when you come in or you lose all your
31 ammunition because officers don't want to be fired on by the grunts. (Laughter) So you

1 know we didn't have any guns or anything to take over there. We would have fired on
2 these guys I'm sure. So we're taking apart the cots and we're on our way in force headed
3 over to the EM club. They are about 20 other guys standing there waiting for us. The
4 MPs show up in a deuce and a half and start waiving their nightsticks around and
5 managed to get us corralled and back to our quarters on the beach there. Then they turned
6 right around and said hook them up guys; you're heading back out.

7 RV: Oh really?

8 SD: Yes.

9 RV: They're going to get rid of you?

10 SD: We got suited up and got all of our gear and the helicopters were out on the
11 pad within an hour and a half and we were back out in the field.

12 RV: Was that planned?

13 SD: I think they wanted us out of there because we were going to hurt some
14 people. You just don't fuck with a guy who's come out of the field.

15 RV: Right. And the guys who beat up your friend, they were rear personnel?

16 SD: They were rear personnel. Yes they were REMFs. You know it's probably a
17 good thing that they sent us back to the field because we would have found them and hurt
18 them.

19 RV: This was Chu Lai?

20 SD: This was Chu Lai.

21 RV: This is what, in 1970 still?

22 SD: Yes. This is all 1970. You're going to ask me what month and sometime
23 between March and August.

24 RV: Actually I'm not going to ask you month because I know that's hard to
25 remember. Tell me a little bit more about the racism in the rear when you were in the
26 field, that part of your tour.

27 SD: I didn't see any racism in the field. We had black guys in our unit and I mean
28 they were all good soldiers. One of them was a medic and all good straight tough guys.
29 It's when you got back to the rear that you saw the racial issues.

30 RV: Why was that?

1 SD: Some of it had to do with what was going on back in the States. It was a
2 reflection of that. The black guys tended to hang out together. A lot of black power
3 salutes. They would attempt to intimidate white guys.

4 RV: How would they do that?

5 SD: Just by getting in your face, trying to start a fight. When I got my rear job...I
6 liked to play basketball and I played a lot of basketball in the rear. I had played a lot in a
7 sandlot growing up in New York and often times on the basketball court if you're playing
8 and something didn't go their way I mean you would find two or three of these guys in
9 your face.

10 RV: That sounds like it's really tightly wound.

11 SD: It was. You really, in my mind, had to be careful where you were at night in
12 the rear.

13 RV: Really?

14 SD: Much like walking around in some cities in the United States where there
15 were certain neighborhoods that you just didn't want to be in at night, same kind of
16 feeling.

17 RV: That's incredible and you're all there. When they did the black power salute,
18 was that an insult? Did you all take it that way?

19 SD: We thought it was an insult and a threat. I took it as a threat. I really didn't
20 understand why the officer corps didn't shut this stuff down.

21 RV: Were there black officers?

22 SD: Not a whole lot. I can remember a couple but that's all.

23 RV: Why do you think the officers didn't deal with it?

24 SD: Maybe they were intimidated by it too. Maybe they felt that politically, if
25 they tried to step in they would have a bigger problem than what they had

26 RV: How often did you go back, when you were in the field how often did you go
27 back to the rear to rest up?

28 SD: Oh geez, not enough.

29 RV: (Laughter)

1 SD: I guess you would be out in the field like three or four weeks and then you
2 would come back for like a three-day stand down and then you would go back out again.
3 I think that's right but I...

4 RV: Give or take.

5 SD: Give or take.

6 RV: Do you remember any other incidents, any racial incidents besides this one? I
7 mean you talked about the black power salutes. Anything happen to you personally?

8 SD: No, other than guys get in my face. I guess I said earlier I was always the
9 kind of guy that didn't back down for much of anything. I guess once somebody sees
10 you're not going to intimidate this person they kind of leave you alone. The group
11 dynamics were different than the individual. It just seemed like if the black guys would
12 get in a group, I mean they would just get more full of themselves.

13 RV: Was that true for you all as well?

14 SD: I don't think so. There were some guys in and around that would use the N
15 word but not very many of them. I don't know about anybody else but I always tried to
16 discourage that. I mean what do you want to do that for? Why do you want to light that
17 match for?

18 RV: Were there any people straddling the fence? Any black guys, white guys who
19 were friends with both sides?

20 SD: Well like I said the guys who I had served with in the field that were black,
21 they weren't that way at all.

22 RV: Really?

23 SD: Yes. It was always the guy in the rear. The black guys working in the motor
24 pool or they were cooks or clerks. Well not so much the clerical people either. If you
25 were a clerk in a brigade or battalion headquarters or even a company headquarters I
26 don't think that you would get away with that.

27 RV: Right. The black guys in the field with you, when they came back to the rear
28 they acted differently.

29 SD: No, they hung around us.

30 RV: Really?

31 SD: They hung around with the company.

1 RV: Well Steve why don't we go ahead and stop for the day. We're right at our
2 time limit.
3 SD: Ok.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Stephen W. Dant
Conducted by Richard Burks Verrone, Ph.D.
April 20, 2005
Transcribed by Brooke Tomlin

1 RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history interview with
2 Mr. Stephen Dant. I am again in Lubbock, Texas. Today is April 20, 2005. It's
3 approximately 8:22 a.m. Central Standard Time. Steve you're in Colorado Springs again.
4 Why don't we pick up where we left off last time in our conversation? Basically it was
5 covering what your typical day was like and what some of your activities were. I wanted
6 to talk to you a little bit more about you equipment and some of the things you carried
7 with you in the field. If you want to pick up there, Steve.

8 SD: Sure. Well what I think I said last time we were talking about of the basics.
9 One of those was the amount of water that you carried. It was very hot there, very humid.
10 I remember I carried two containers of water. One was just a bladder thing. I think it held
11 like 2 quarts of water and I also carried a standard canteen on my belt. I tried to drink as
12 little as I possibly could during the day and really replenish as you kind of standing down
13 in the evening. You had to replenish water during the day but you were losing it probably
14 as fast as you were putting it in your body.

15 RV: Were you able to get a resupply of water? Were you filling up your canteens
16 in the streams and using your...

17 SD: Mostly – especially out on the Batangan Peninsula – we were filling it up
18 wherever we could find it. Dropping in...which sometimes was even rice paddy water.
19 Then dropping in a lot of whatever the tablets were that would hopefully sterilize in some
20 fashion the water to make it drinkable. It never tasted very good, but at least you didn't
21 get sick from it.

1 RV: Did you have people in your unit who had problems with water rationing and
2 making sure they were careful about it?

3 SD: Yeah I mean I think I carried as much or more water than anybody certainly
4 in the squad maybe in the platoon. There were other guys that just carried a couple of
5 canteens and seemed like they were always thirsty. You learned really not to share your
6 water or you were going to be in as much trouble as they were. They had to learn to
7 conserve or carry more water.

8 RV: So you guys didn't ask each other for water very often?

9 SD: No, that just wasn't done. You carried what you needed. It's one thing to bum
10 a cigarette off of somebody but it was another thing to ask somebody for somebody else's
11 water.

12 RV: Right.

13 SD: It was the same thing with ammunition. I carried three bandoliers. I carried an
14 M-16 rifle so I carried like three bandoliers of, what do they call them?

15 RV: What, the ammunition for the M-16?

16 SD: Yes the ammunition, clips of ammunition. I think there were seven or eight
17 clips of ammunition on each bandolier. And those were, a couple wrapped around my
18 belt and one wrapped around my shoulder. Most guys carried two. I was always afraid
19 that I did not want to run out of ammunition.

20 RV: Wanted to have as much as possible.

21 SD: Yes.

22 RV: Well that makes sense in a war zone to be kind of ready for that.

23 SD: It makes for a heavier pack.

24 RV: Sure. Did your equipment function properly, starting with your M-16?

25 SD: Yeah for the most part. I really didn't get some of the stories that I was
26 reading; you know negative stories about the M-16. I never had a problem, never had the
27 weapon not fire when I needed it. I always thought that if it was taken care of and it was
28 sighted properly it was a very accurate weapon. I never had an incident where a pin came
29 out of a hand grenade when it wasn't supposed to. I never even saw any of our M-60
30 machine gun. It always worked fine. So I thought our equipment was...we were in pretty
31 good shape.

1 RV: Tell me about your weapons in general. You had your M-16. How about a
2 .45, did you carry that?

3 SD: No I didn't.

4 RV: What else did you carry with you as far as weapons are concerned?

5 SD: I carried a knife. I don't know if it was a bayonet or not. It could have been a
6 bayonet. I carried usually a couple of hand grenades. The other stuff, the other weaponry
7 was kind of divided amongst the squad. If you weren't carrying a belt of M-60
8 ammunition then you were probably carrying a couple of claymores. Or maybe a few
9 extra rounds for the guy who was carrying the M-79.

10 RV: Was that expected for you all to kind of pick up a load for those?

11 SD: It was kind of divvied up. When I first got into country the squad leader kind
12 of handed you the stuff that you were going to carry. Once you got into country for a
13 while you just kind of understood that you're carrying this, I'm carrying this, you guys
14 are carrying that. It's just kind of automatically divvied out. I would bet you that it came
15 within a half a pound in terms of weight division amongst the squad in terms of evening
16 it out.

17 RV: So everything was distributed equally.

18 SD: By weight.

19 RV: Yes, you pulled your own share.

20 SD: Right.

21 RV: Were you ordered to do that or was that something you all just did on your
22 own?

23 SD: Well it could have been ordered. I mean it would have been ordered, but I
24 never heard an order to that effect. It was just done.

25 RV: What was your favorite weapon?

26 SD: The M-16.

27 RV: Why was that? You already said it was accurate

28 SD: It was accurate. I felt like next to the M-60...I felt like I could react a lot
29 quicker with an M-16 to anything that was going on then any other weapon that I could
30 be carrying. I did feel like it was accurate. I felt I could turn and fire or be on the ground
31 and fire with a great deal of accuracy in a hurry if I had to. That wasn't the case

1 necessarily I guess if you're carrying an M-79 or grenade launcher but you couldn't spray
2 ammunition with an M-79 the way you could with an M-16. An M-60 took a lot longer to
3 get going. Besides I wasn't the biggest guy in the squad. That usually is assigned to the
4 biggest guy in the squad because it was a pretty heavy weapon to carry but it took a little
5 while to get that weapon going.

6 RV: What would you say was the most feared weapon?

7 SD: From the enemy?

8 RV: Yes.

9 SD: Probably RPGs, at least in my case. Man those things come at you and maybe
10 because I've been under a couple of attacks where a couple of them have come pretty
11 close.

12 RV: What it is like for an RPG round to be shot at you?

13 SD: Well the first one I remember was at night and you can kind of hear it coming
14 in and I didn't realize what it was at first but once you hear one you know what the hell it
15 is the next time.

16 RV: What does it sound like? Is it very distinct?

17 SD: I just remember seeing a flash of light and whistling through the air. Then
18 you know the explosion hits with a thud and it's actually bigger I think, the grenade itself
19 is bigger than a hand grenade so it's a bigger explosive going off. I mean it caused a lot
20 of damage in the surrounding area. If you weren't well fortified or underground a good
21 piece I mean you're going to get hurt.

22 RV: Right. Okay.

23 SD: I've been close enough where it's literally you know shook the ground and
24 knocked stuff over in my trench. It felt like the trench was going to come down on top of
25 me.

26 RV: That's pretty powerful. Why don't we talk about the enemy for a little bit?
27 Tell me what your general impressions were of who you were facing in the fields.

28 SD: Well I faced two different enemy in the field. When I first was in country it
29 was almost all Viet Cong and they were guerilla warriors. I don't know where they were
30 in the daytime, I never saw a man over probably the age of 14 under the age of...well, it
31 was hard to tell how old they were, but under the age of 50 during the day. During the

1 day if you would go through the villages it was all mamasons and kids, babysons. They
2 were good at it. They knew the terrain. They were operating where they lived. I mean
3 they knew how to put together booby traps and mine the trails and attack and disappear at
4 night, good at ambushing at night. So you really had to be on your guard all the time. In
5 the daytime if you're walking trails you had to be constantly looking for mines. Very
6 rarely did we ever get attacked during the daytime in the Batangan Peninsula. At night
7 you had to make sure that you set up your perimeters, your ambushes correctly and you
8 had to be careful to stay alert and awake and you just had to have your act together or you
9 were going to get hurt.

10 RV: What about the strengths? People talk about today, looking back that they
11 were fighting in their 'backyard.' Did that make a difference?

12 SD: Sure it does. It would have made a difference if I was fighting in Peekskill,
13 New York where I grew up as opposed to the jungles of Vietnam because I knew all the
14 woods and the terrain in that area. I knew all the hiding places and how to get over a hill
15 quick, or just where the trails were. It's a real advantage in a guerilla warfare setting.
16 That having been said, I never felt like that they...you know things were kind of equal at
17 night between the Americans and the Viet Cong I thought because what we gave up in
18 terms of knowing the terrain. I think we made up for in terms of firepower and how much
19 we could bring to bear. We always had pretty much control of the situation in the daytime

20 RV: What were the major weaknesses of the enemy would you say?

21 SD: Well firepower, for sure. They couldn't bring to bear nearly the amount of
22 firepower that we could. I also had a sense that when we were being attacked by them
23 from time to time that there weren't nearly as many of them. We had a squad of ten
24 people and I always thought there were probably two or three guys that were throwing a
25 couple of grenades at us and they were disappearing into the woods. But to their credit
26 they knew what their weaknesses were. It would have been a big mistake on their part to
27 try to stand and fight. That would have played into our hands.

28 RV: So that was rare when they would stand and fight you.

29 SD: That's exactly right. The whole time I was over there I got into an extended
30 skirmish or even small battle maybe twice.

31 RV: Wow. And the rest was?

1 SD: The rest was all hit and run. Either you were hitting them in an ambush or
2 they were hitting you in an ambush and it was over in a matter of, if not minutes, then
3 seconds.

4 RV: Wow. How frustrating was that for you all? Or was that perfectly okay for
5 you?

6 SD: Well it was frustrating because you realize that you have the firepower to
7 really hurt these people and to win this thing and so when you can't...you know it's like
8 chasing somebody around in a ring who you know if you could just get after them and lay
9 a glove on them you're going to knock them out. But dancing like a butterfly and sting
10 like a bee kind of deal. Steal a phrase from Mr. Ali.

11 RV: That's a good analogy.

12 SD: You know some of this registered at least with some of us from a political
13 standpoint. I never understood or disagreed a lot with how we were going about fighting
14 this war. I thought that we should be putting notice out that if you're going to control the
15 countryside then you have to control the population. If you're going to control the
16 population then from my standpoint is that you move the population out of the field so
17 that you consider anybody that is in the field the enemy. And quit screwing around with
18 all the political governors, and regional governors and chieftains where you have to go
19 into these zones where the rules change in terms of who can be fired upon and when you
20 can call in artillery and you know it just gave more advantage to a guerilla fighter. Take
21 that away from them so that if you're in the field and you see somebody you know then
22 that's the enemy.

23 RV: Were you all aware of the overall strategy of your enemy? That these hit and
24 run tactics were basically, we know now looking back, just a kind of maneuver or a tactic
25 to keep you all occupied, keep the United States occupied and just waiting over year after
26 year after year until we basically said enough is enough, this is not going to end or we're
27 not changing our strategy to do certain things such as invade North Vietnam or invade
28 Laos. Were y'all aware of the big picture? Were you seeing this over time or some of
29 you?

30 SD: Well I think in a roundabout way the frustration with regard to the tactics we
31 were using was I guess part of that. To me looking back, you know and even somewhat

1 then I think I had it in the back of my mind but you know it goes back to what I was
2 saying earlier. We needed to control the territory and in doing so we needed to divide the
3 people into either you're with us or you're against us and move the people who are with
4 us back behind Highway 1 and we will consider anybody on the other side of Highway 1
5 the enemy. Because the issue of, I didn't see where body counts were getting us
6 anywhere.

7 RV: So you felt that policy was not quite the right one?

8 SD: Right. That's why I say just because you kill a few enemy doesn't mean
9 you've won anything. You would go up and you would take a hilltop where you had been
10 taking mortars or grenades from the night before and find a cache of weapons and you
11 give them back the hilltop. You would leave. They are going to be right back on that
12 hilltop the next morning having not lost any strategic location.

13 RV: Was this discussed by you all? Did you say well this is crazy, we just did that
14 and they are doing this?

15 SD: Yes. I remember talking about you know, you know after...I may have
16 mentioned this to you last time. We got into a firefight one evening, one night and it was
17 one of the more sustained firefights in that we were taking incoming for more than a few
18 minutes and we were trying to get our artillery support. We called in for artillery but we
19 couldn't get a political clearance from whoever the regional chief or whatever they call
20 them for like 20 or 25 minutes. And those 20, 25 minutes in the kind of warfare we were
21 fighting; you know that just ties one hand behind your back. It was stupid.

22 RV: So you were all actively discussing this on the ground?

23 SD: Yeah. The frustration that we felt that we were fighting a war for the South
24 Vietnamese but we couldn't get an artillery clearance from this regional and I've
25 forgotten the term they used but administrator, Vietnamese administration person. We're
26 fighting for his country. So the tactics, that's an example of how the tactics were in our
27 minds. We were all pissed off about it.

28 RV: Was there anything to do about it? You couldn't change on the ground?

29 SD: Well I wouldn't know at my level. I'm sure my company commander had
30 something to say about it the next morning or that night or our platoon leader, our LT had

1 something to say about it. I don't know what was said and I don't know what was said
2 back to them.

3 RV: Tell me about the tactics of the enemy besides a hit and run. What else would
4 they do or is that what you saw mainly?

5 SD: I saw a lot of, you know, we'd set up a perimeter at night. They would...and
6 it's hard to say that you saw 'a lot of'. You would go for a week or ten days and not see
7 anything. My sense was that they would watch us and see how we were operating and try
8 to determine where we were going to go. Watching us to try to determine if we were
9 going to go someplace that might work to their advantage or find or observe some type of
10 something that somebody was doing that they could use to their advantage. Sometimes I
11 felt like they were out there in the woods waiting for us to fall asleep. You know so that
12 they could sneak in and throw in a couple of grenades into the perimeter or where we
13 were setting up an ambush. That was my sense at least in dealing with the Viet Cong.

14 RV: How about NVA? How often would you run into them?

15 SD: Well I started seeing NVA when we got out of the Batangan Peninsula. We
16 started operating more west of Chu Lai, up in the foothills. The terrain looked a lot like
17 the hills the size of what you would see in like Pennsylvania, that kind of thing. There
18 you would see pith helmets. I think that they were also operating in conjunction with the
19 Viet Cong because we continued to see some of them from time to time, but more NVA
20 who had their act together with regard to RPGs. Sometime, I don't know, I think it was in
21 May we walked into this valley and got pinned down for a couple of days and I'm sure
22 that was NVA.

23 RV: Okay. Why do you say that, because they were able to keep you down there?

24 SD: Because they were able to sustain a kind of ongoing confrontation longer
25 than the VC ever would. They had position kind of a triangulated high ground that they
26 held and they used it very well.

27 RV: Steve, you describe some of your tactics that you guys would do, kind of out
28 setting up the ambushes and what not. Can you describe some of those common tactics
29 and how you all would actually go about doing that? I'm not sure people listening to this
30 in the future will understand fully what it means to set up an ambush or what it means to
31 set up a defense perimeter or what it means to go search and destroy.

1 SD: Most of the time that I was out in the field I operated at either company or
2 platoon strength. A lot of times it was at...the company would set up at night somewhere
3 and set up a perimeter. The company consisted of three platoons and each one of those
4 platoons was about 25 or 30 guys. The platoons were divided into three squads with 8 to
5 10 guys in a squad. So you would set up as a company at night and try to find a hilltop or
6 someplace that was defensible in a circle and dig your positions so that you would
7 triangulate your lines of fire if you came under attack that night. So if everybody opened
8 fire at once there would be ribbons of fire cutting through the night. It would be very
9 difficult, if everybody's firing at once, to come through all of those fire zones. There
10 were also a lot of times we were operating a platoon and a platoon would set up a
11 perimeter so it would be a smaller perimeter. Instead of having three or four guys in a
12 foxhole, you might have two or three guys in a foxhole. Then it's tougher to stay awake
13 because you're doing two on and two off. I mean two hours awake and two hours asleep
14 kind of deal. Or from time to time and usually if you went out as a squad and that didn't
15 happen very often during the day unless you were sent out on some kind of tangent to
16 check out some spots. But most often we operated as squad at night where we would go
17 off the hilltop where we would set up the perimeter either in a platoon or company size
18 and eight or ten of us would find a location near a trail that we thought that the VC or
19 NVA may be using that night and we'd set up an ambush.

20 RV: How was that done?

21 SD: Usually it was either a semicircle or a straight line that ran parallel to the trail
22 that you thought that the VC or NVA were going to operating. In front of us we would set
23 up a line of claymores and we would set up the M-60 in a position that we felt that it
24 could be used to utilize the firepower as much as we could. It would hopefully take out as
25 many of the enemy as we possibly could in the first burst. As I remember, we probably
26 also set up a couple of claymores behind us although usually we had some...usually there
27 was a lot of heavy brush or we were in heavy jungle so it would be tough to get to us
28 from the back end without hearing a lot of whatever it was coming through the brush. We
29 were really backed up against something that we didn't feel like somebody could come at
30 us from the rear. Then we would call in on the radio our exact position. You really had to
31 have your act together with regard to the map so that we could, if we got attacked, or we

1 were successful in triggering an ambush we could also call in artillery on the position in
2 front of us so that the arty guys in the rear had our exact position and they were prepared
3 to fire at a moment's notice on the position in front of us if we called for it that night.
4 Then it was a lot of... I've forgotten how the sleep breaks worked but if there were nine
5 guys in a squad there was at least three or four of us awake at any given time. So you're
6 either doing one hour on and one hour off or two hours on and two hours off all through
7 the night.

8 RV: Was sleep deprivation a problem?

9 SD: Always. (Laughter) You never had enough sleep in the field. That was the
10 worst with setting up, with setting up on a squad level out somewhere on an ambush
11 because you had eight or nine guys that divide up a whole night's sleep and you had to
12 have at least half the squad awake at any given time. You did that for safety. You know it
13 is very difficult to stay awake so if somebody does fall asleep there's still two guys
14 awake. Chances are all three of you aren't going to fall asleep. Even if you were
15 operating as a company on top of a hill or something where you had set up a perimeter.
16 You would still have a couple or three hours of...in a...in a foxhole at night you know
17 watching out for the enemy. So you know I don't think that if you're in the field on any
18 given night you're probably not getting more than five hours of sleep and that's
19 interrupted sleep. There's not more than three hours altogether.

20 RV: I can imagine during the day the heat, the movement, the stress; I mean it
21 takes a toll on you physically for the tiredness.

22 SD: Right. Well sometimes during the day we would, I mean we would stay in
23 that same perimeter and guys would be operating on patrols off that perimeter so you
24 would have some down time during the day where you could just kind of put up your
25 poncho liner and stake it out and get under it and just kind of maybe snooze for a couple
26 of hours. You could catch up on that every once in a while.

27 RV: Right. Was there anything that you found after you had been there a while in
28 the field that you wanted to do differently, that you could have done differently as far as
29 tactics are concerned? Or was what you just described in the daily activities sufficient in
30 your mind?

1 SD: Well again, I'll go back to what I said before. You know I thought that our
2 tactics were pretty good but I thought that...in terms of the smaller picture. But I thought
3 that the bigger picture was all screwed up. I really felt that we needed to do a better job of
4 differentiating the enemy and forcing the issue with the people that were living out in the
5 countryside. You're either with us or against us. That would have made the job easier.
6 You wouldn't have to have to go through first trying to identify who you're shooting at.

7 RV: I've heard that when you all would have to wait to call in fire missions and
8 wait to move out on an enemy who just attacked you. People higher up than you having
9 to check with the province chief or the village chief if it was ok to move through that
10 region. Did you have problems like that?

11 SD: Yes. Well that goes back to...

12 RV: You describe that at one time.

13 SD: Right. That's the one that is most vivid in my memory because when you're
14 getting attacked and you can't get artillery because some province chief won't clear your
15 artillery support. You tended to get a little frustrated.

16 RV: Yes.

17 SD: But I know that there had to be other times where we saw the same thing.
18 Again you go into a zone that would change from a free fire zone to whatever they called
19 it zone. I never understood that. It just made no sense to me.

20 RV: Was it true....

21 SD: If you're out there as an infantry unit, you're tying one hand behind your
22 back if you're establishing different parts of the countryside in terms of how you can
23 operate against the enemy.

24 RV: Well that makes sense. That's very different from previous wars that the
25 United States have fought. Were there clear lines of demarcation?

26 SD: Sure. I know when you're...when the GIs in World War II went into a village
27 or something I guess they had to differentiate between the people who lived there in the
28 village and the Germans that were trying to kill them. There wasn't that same, from what
29 I've seen or know, there wasn't that same kind of thing going on all throughout the
30 countryside.

1 RV: No. Tell me about the Vietnamese civilians. How did they treat you and what
2 was your impression of them?

3 SD: Some of them treated us very nicely. Some of them I wouldn't trust to turn
4 my back on. By the time...well, let me go back for a second. There was a time where I
5 had supper a couple of times with a Vietnamese family where they invited a couple of us
6 guys into their house and they cooked a meal and it was very nice and we sat there with
7 the Mamason and the Papason and the kids and everything. I couldn't eat the food.

8 RV: Why?

9 SD: Because it was so hot.

10 RV: (Laughter)

11 SD: I mean whatever spices they were putting on this thing. I'm sure it tasted fine.
12 It was some kind of fish and egg meal but the spice would just, you know you think
13 Mexican spices are hot. I mean those Vietnamese, unbelievable the things that they can
14 eat. But that was you know I thought was very nice and very gracious of them to do that.
15 But there were other villages that you know that you could just see that the people were
16 looking at you out of the side of their eyes kind of thing. I didn't know if it was because
17 on the hillside a couple hundred yards away there were VC or NVA looking down at
18 them to see how they would handle us or what. But I guess my...the realization came to
19 me you know after I had been in country...I don't know, six or seven months. We were
20 operating with an ARVN unit. That's the South Vietnamese Army in a joint operation.
21 We came under attack somehow and we brought in, we called in for artillery support and
22 gunships showed up and we're strafing the hillsides where the attack had come from. I
23 turned around and that ARVN unit was gone.

24 RV: They had taken off?

25 SD: They had di di mau man, they were gone. We were all sitting around talking
26 amongst each other and I go, 'What are we fighting for these guys for if they won't stand
27 and fight for their own country?'

28 RV: Was that a common experience?

29 SD: You know I don't know. I have heard in conventions that I go to now some
30 other guys talk about that. I didn't know if it was common or not at the time. When I saw
31 that they wouldn't stand and fight in that incident I thought, 'If we ever leave these guys

1 are dead.' Now having said that there were, we had what we called Kit Carson scouts that
2 operated with us, Vietnamese soldiers who went out with us to help us on patrols and
3 help us with the terrain and the logistics of being out in the field. Those guys were pretty
4 gung ho. But the regular Army guys that I saw on that particular day were not good
5 soldiers.

6 RV: How debilitating was that to morale?

7 SD: Well it was very. You know in conjunction and seeing that at the same time
8 we're also becoming aware of what was going on back home. While I was over there
9 Kent State went on and we're turning around and going, 'My God, we're turning rifles on
10 ourselves back home because we're at war for a people who won't fight for themselves.'
11 You know you just felt like you were stuck in the middle of a bad nightmare.

12 RV: After Kent State that was more apparent or was it before that?

13 SD: You know it's like a whole number of things come together at once. I guess
14 Kent State was...at least it hit me pretty hard. I just did not understand, you know what
15 the hell is going on back at the States? This is nuts.

16 RV: How did you find out about it?

17 SD: I think I read it in...I either heard it on the radio or read it in *Stars and*
18 *Stripes*. I do remember seeing an article on it in *Stars and Stripes*. I'm sure it was on the
19 radio too. It was on, what do they call the radio station, I've forgotten.

20 RV: You're talking about the station for Vietnam itself?

21 SD: No, I'm talking about Armed Forces radio in Vietnam.

22 RV: Right. Well just for a second let's talk about the antiwar movement. How did
23 that affect you all while you were in country?

24 SD: It was a mixed bag. Because on one hand I appreciated what was I guess the
25 position of let's get out of this war because I felt that if we're not in this thing to win it
26 let's get the hell out of here. I felt like when I was in the field that due to some of the
27 circumstances that I described earlier with regard to political issues and the ARVN
28 wasn't going to fight and we were talking about...from my standpoint we needed to go
29 and conquer this land. As opposed to just shooting people and putting numbers up on a
30 board. If we weren't in this thing to win it then let's get the hell out of it. From that
31 perspective I guess a lot of other guys felt like we appreciated the antiwar movement

1 because maybe it would get us home. On the other hand we were hearing stories about
2 how guys you know got home and they weren't being treated very well and being spit
3 upon or being called baby killers. We really were frustrated about that part of it and
4 didn't get why you wouldn't support the troops that were trying to help the people in
5 South Vietnam. I think ultimately most of us felt that the Communists were bad guys.
6 That as frustrated as we were about what was going on in South Vietnam and all the
7 hypocrisy with the politics was going on there. The North Vietnamese were not good
8 people. The North Vietnamese were totalitarians; it was Communism. They were going
9 to come down there and they were going to hurt some people if they ended up winning
10 this war. So it wasn't as though we didn't feel that the cause was just. It was just that the
11 cause was all screwed up.

12 RV: When you got home were you able to reflect more on that overall big picture
13 or was that something that you just wanted to move away from, move past?

14 SD: Um...

15 RV: Your describing stuff and you seem to be really aware of when you were in
16 country of this bigger picture and I'm wondering once you got through the experience did
17 you just drop that, move away from that.

18 SD: Well some of this bigger picture had to do with some of the images that I was
19 seeing. I really remember thinking that if we aren't in this thing to win it, let's get the hell
20 out of here. I never felt like, and I think a whole lot of other guys felt the same way, that
21 we weren't there to win it. For some reason we were just going through the motions. So
22 when I got home, you know when I got home I was just frankly happy to be home. I was
23 hooking up with friends. I was fortunate in many ways that I had a rear job for the last
24 few months that I was in Vietnam so I had some time being in the rear to decompress
25 from being in the field. It would have been...so it wasn't as difficult for me to come
26 home, as it was probably for some of those other guys who came out of the field. You
27 know they do a little stand down back in the rear someplace and then get on a plane and
28 end up back in Ft. Lewis, Washington and man that's a 180-degree turn.

29 RV: Yes.

30 SD: Whereas I had the opportunity to at least 40 degrees or so before I came
31 home. Also when I got home, I got home in April of 1970. John Kerry was testifying in

1 armed services committee or wherever he was. Saying we were all a bunch of heathens
2 and war criminals. You see recently in the last couple of years that we're a bunch of
3 barbarians. You know people are looking at you like you're from Mars.

4 RV: (Laughter)

5 SD: And I would say to my family, 'I don't know where he is coming from or
6 what he's talking about but the things he's talking about I never saw. It didn't happen in
7 my unit.' So it was a combination of...and I'm not sure I'm answering your question here
8 but it was a combination of, if Vietnam ever came up it was in the context of what was
9 being portrayed as the American GI at the time or nobody wanted to talk about it.

10 RV: That's very interesting. We can get into detail about that once we get to that
11 point chronologically.

12 SD: Yeah I think I've digressed here.

13 RV: Well no you answered the question and it's an interesting observation and
14 it's a phenomenon that has not...it did not happen before in the United States and it really
15 hasn't happened since in the United States. It's something very worthy of discussing. Let
16 me ask you about something else. November 1969 the My Lai massacre news came out
17 in public for the first time and you're in country.

18 SD: Right.

19 RV: Tell me about that. How did you find out about this and how did it affect you
20 and what did you think?

21 SD: God I don't remember when the first time, when I first heard of My Lai. I
22 must have been in AIT if it was November, yeah it would have been Advanced Infantry
23 Training at Ft. Jackson. I guess I was appalled. I just couldn't believe that an American
24 Army soldiers would do that. You know almost in a weird sort of way my first...when I
25 got to Vietnam and I arrive with my company we're operating out in the same area that
26 Lieutenant Calley was.

27 RV: Yes.

28 SD: By that time it was...the full investigation was really going on and the
29 hearings were happening. In fact as I remember hearing about it there was some kind of
30 congressional delegation or there was a lot of investigators, high muckety-muck
31 investigators that went to My Lai at the time that I was there in the field. We had to

1 spread out our company in smaller units than we had ever done before. We were out on
2 four, five men ambushes. I figured out later it was because we were the, you know they
3 wanted trip wires everywhere while these guys were there investigating. (Laughter) So
4 we were the human trip wires for all of these, whoever was doing the investigating for the
5 hearings that were about to happen in Congress and the court-martial and whatever.

6 RV: It kind of provided security in a sense.

7 SD: You were out providing security. I've digressed here a little bit. After
8 operating in the Batangan Peninsula and walking through all of the mines field there and
9 the frustration that goes with having all the Vietnamese be very friendly to you during the
10 day and you know damn well they are throwing hand grenades at you at night. I think I
11 said earlier, I don't think that there was...almost every day somebody would hit a mine in
12 our company or it seemed that way. Sometimes it would be minor injury and sometimes
13 somebody would lose a foot or an eye. I don't think anyone ever got killed but a lot of
14 people got hurt by those mines. So you walk through those mind fields long enough and
15 you do it week after week and month after month and you think that you have bunch of
16 Viet Cong trapped in a village. I mean I can understand how it would happen but I could
17 never condone it. As frustrated as we all were out there, none of us could ever picture
18 ourselves going in and massacring a village. There was something wrong with that unit.

19 RV: How about as part of the Americal Division? Did it make it extra difficult,
20 for lack of a better phrase? I mean this is your unit.

21 SD: I didn't think so at the time and I've thought about that over the years and I
22 guess it's left its mark on the Americal over the years but it didn't occur to me at the
23 time.

24 RV: Okay. Well, a couple of other questions here before we break. Did you ever
25 experience any friendly fire incidents? Was that something that was common?

26 SD: Only from a, we called in artillery one night and either we had given them the
27 wrong coordinates or they had the wrong coordinates and the first few rounds that came
28 in were virtually right on top of us. I remember the RTO guy screaming into the radio,
29 'Cease fire, cease fire, cease fire!' I think a couple of guys got hurt but I don't remember
30 anybody getting killed.

31 RV: Okay.

1 SD: I don't ever remember anybody shooting anybody else by mistake or a
2 grenade going off by mistake, that kind of thing.

3 RV: Did you guys ever operate with snipers ever in your unit?

4 SD: Not that I can remember. I do remember...we operated with dog teams in our
5 unit from time to time and you know as I said with Kit Carson scouts. I do not remember
6 any snipers in our unit. I remember we had one guy who left the unit to go off to sniper
7 school. Had a couple guys who left the unit to go be door gunners, that kind of thing.

8 RV: Right. Tell me about the canine experiences.

9 SD: It was great to have a dog in the unit, but it was so hot they didn't last very
10 long. We really used them more to get the scent of, if we were in a village, get the scent
11 of weapons or if there was somebody down in a tunnel, get their scent, that kind of thing.
12 In terms of walking point, hell at least when I was walking point, the dog was behind me.
13 But they also helped you if you were on a perimeter help to come to alert in a hurry. It's
14 good to have their nose around. It was so hot over there that they really...you had to stop
15 for them probably more than you had to stop, well I know, more than the soldiers because
16 they just, they couldn't take the heat.

17 RV: Right. So they would be out there and you would just get a new dog or they
18 would retire it?

19 SD: They would come out with a handler. There would be a dog handler with
20 him.

21 RV: Would the handler take him away or give him water?

22 SD: Yes, they would slow them down and give them water. They'd go, 'Hey we
23 got to stop here for a few minutes and get him some water and let him cool off,' or let her
24 cool off, 'or they're going to collapse from heat stroke or something.'

25 RV: How would you rate the intelligence you all received?

26 SD: Well that's hard for me to say because I was a lowly grunt. My orders were
27 just kind of to go over there. (Laughter)

28 RV: (Laughter) Right.

29 SD: You know I didn't often know why. You're probably better off asking
30 somebody who was higher rank than I was, somebody who operated as a platoon leader
31 or a company commander. They can probably tell you that better than I could.

1 RV: Okay. Steve, what about communication? Could you all communicate
2 effectively in the field?

3 SD: You know I thought so. I don't remember a time that we lost radio contact
4 unless the radio got injured, or I mean...injured. It got shot up. I only remember that
5 happening once. I just don't remember not being in radio contact.

6 RV: Okay so that was not a problem. And how about out on an ambush or
7 walking the trails, you all had effective communication?

8 SD: Yes. If you were on an ambush you had a radio with you and basically it was
9 a matter of you sent, nobody talked on the radio, you sent a bunch of...the RTO operator
10 would be listening for headquarters in the rear. They would call out your call sign and
11 you would answer them by just clicking once or twice on the phone, sending out two
12 SQUEL signals so that you would never have to talk.

13 RV: Okay. Did you ever work with troops from Australia, New Zealand, South
14 Korea?

15 SD: Korea.

16 RV: Oh yeah?

17 SD: Yeah. I worked with what are they called, ROK Marines.

18 RV: The ROKs, yes. Tell me about them.

19 SD: They were some tough son of a bitches. They really were.

20 RV: Why?

21 SD: I mean they are physically tough. They just had a chip on their shoulder it
22 seemed like all the time. If you had a couple of beers with them you know they were the
23 kind of guys it would go to their head and the next thing you know there would be a fist
24 fight someplace.

25 RV: (Laughter)

26 SD: But you know on the other hand and I think I only spent like a week with
27 these guys or something but they had their act together. They were more gung ho then we
28 were, very, very, very aggressive. I felt like when we were operating with them we were
29 operating with some first class infantry as opposed to the South Vietnamese soldiers that
30 you know were, as I told you earlier at least in one incident they cut and ran.

31 RV: Yes. It seems like two opposite experiences there.

1 SD: Yes.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Stephen W. Dant
Conducted by Richard Burks Verrone, Ph.D.
May 5, 2005
Transcribed by Brooke Tomlin

1 RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history interview for the
2 Vietnam Archive Oral History project with Mr. Steve Dant. Today is May 5, 2005 and
3 it's 8:20 a.m. Central Standard Time. I'm again in Lubbock, Texas and you, Steve, are in
4 Colorado Springs. Let's continue with discussing your time in country. If you would,
5 Steve, could you describe what it was mentally, emotionally, also physically when you
6 walked point? You mentioned that you did this. Can you tell or describe in general what
7 this was and what kind of affect did it have upon you?

8 SD: Well the guy that was walking point, I guess the first thing I got to say is that
9 was the first guy in line or the guy who was in front of the line, usually it was some type
10 of patrol. Sometimes you were walking a trail. Sometimes you might be in the middle of
11 an open area. Sometimes you might be walking through the jungle or the woods
12 someplace, but it was the guy that was responsible for a couple of things. Trying to make
13 sure that the path that you were taking was safe or trying to identify problems or the
14 enemy in front of you or trying to....in many cases for instance when we were operating
15 out in the Batangan Peninsula it really became a job of, more than anything, spotting
16 mines.

17 RV: Right. That was one of the heaviest mined areas.

18 SD: Yes, right. Or at least it was a lot more heavily mined then we were operating
19 out west at Chu Lai.

20 RV: Was walking point a position of honor or respect?

1 SD: I guess I never really thought about that. I'm not sure. The word 'honor'
2 comes into play but I think there was a lot of respect that was given to whoever was
3 walking point. You know I think that sometimes guys thought the guy who was walking
4 point was nuts. (Laughter)

5 RV: Right. I think maybe people listening to this are going to think, 'Wow.' I
6 mean if you don't want to be somewhere you don't want to be out there.

7 SD: But on the other hand I mean it's...I don't ever remember anybody, you
8 know, being told they were going to walk point and I don't remember anybody
9 volunteering to walk point. It was just kind of a job that got assumed. Somebody, you
10 know, you just kind of all of a sudden that's where your orientation was towards.

11 RV: How did it affect you when you did it?

12 SD: Well, let me say something else here. If you're going to take that position you
13 have to have a certain amount of self-confidence. If I can use a sporting analogy.

14 RV: Of course.

15 SD: If you're playing quarterback or you're playing halfback on a football team
16 you want a guy who you're going to hand the ball off to who has got the ball, who's got a
17 lot of confidence that they are going to get the play made. So, you know, if you don't
18 have a lot of self-confidence in going into that kind of position then it isn't going to work.
19 For the same reason that it isn't going to work if you hand off a ball to a halfback who
20 has got in the back of his mind, 'I don't want to fumble, I don't want to fumble,' well
21 sure as hell he's going to fumble. It's almost an automatic.

22 RV: So you're saying that you've got a...not only do you have to know what
23 you're doing tactically but you need to have in your mind that, 'Okay I'm going to do this
24 and I'll do it well.'

25 SD: Right. I hesitate to use the word cocky but you kind of almost have to be that
26 way. You have to believe that you're good at it and you're going to do a good job.

27 RV: Was that the case with you? Was that how you were?

28 SD: I guess so. I mean I thought that I – although I was always apprehensive and
29 adrenaline was flowing a thousand miles an hour, but I felt like I knew what I was doing
30 and that again the cockiness comes out but I felt like in some cases it was better off that I
31 was doing it than somebody else was.

1 RV: Like you could control your own destiny.

2 SD: Right.

3 RV: How long would one need to be out in the field before they would have
4 confidence in themselves, I guess this is personality dependent as well, be confident in
5 themselves to walk point or to be able to be appointed or kind of rotated into walking
6 point?

7 SD: Well I think I was out in the field for a few months at least. I got there in
8 February and I think I was walking point, I was point man of my squad I think in about,
9 boy it's hard to remember, probably May or somewhere in there. No, it was later then
10 that. June. So a few months, so I was probably in field a few months before I was
11 walking point.

12 RV: Do you remember any incidents that specifically happened to you while on
13 point?

14 SD: Well yeah I...that's when I got wounded.

15 RV: Yes.

16 SD: That's probably the most significant. (Laughter)

17 RV: It's pretty significant. Do you want to talk about that incident?

18 SD: Sure we can.

19 RV: Okay.

20 SD: We were out west of Chu Lai someplace. Part of this relates to a story I was
21 telling earlier about some sergeants who I thought didn't have their act together. We had
22 a new squad leader. A guy who had been transferred up from, oh man I forgot, I think it
23 was 4th Infantry but don't hold me to that. He had been operating down south and I think
24 they were starting to shift part of his unit home. Don't hold me to that either. That's kind
25 of recollections I have, but I could be totally wrong. Anyway he came into the squad. We
26 were coming off the...we had been operating off of some hilltop. I think we had been out
27 there for a couple of weeks and patrolling the areas during the day and going off the hill
28 and setting up ambushes at night. We were operating in platoon strength. Our squad was
29 the point squad. I was on point that day. We were looking for a trail to take us up to
30 another hilltop and I think there had been some activity reported by some helicopter. A
31 huey had been flying over some place, somewhere. Anyway we came off the hill and

1 came down into this valley. We were walking across this valley, we were walking across
2 this valley and I wanted to...we walked into the middle of this kind of wide open field
3 and the grass was about knee or thigh high. I wanted to get along the tree line because it
4 would provide more, I thought it was safer and would provide more cover whereas we
5 were just kind of sitting out in the open. So I remember getting to this....so I stopped and
6 I went back and told the sergeant that I wanted to maneuver back along the tree line and
7 still head the same direction but it felt like we would be a lot safer and for whatever
8 reason he didn't want to do that. I almost felt like he wanted to see some action and draw
9 some fire and whatever his reasons were. We got into a big heated argument and you
10 know he just finally pulled rank and said, 'Move it right down on the line that you're at.'
11 So I had lost my cool and my temper and I wasn't thinking as well as I should have been
12 because I was so hot under the collar. It came to a point where we were, it came to a
13 hedgerow and on the other side of the hedgerow was a trail. I thought that there was a
14 trail there but I didn't know for sure. Anyway I was so pissed I just went crashing
15 through this hedgerow followed by the, we had a dog team with us that day, so the dog
16 and his handler were behind me and I got onto this trail and took about two or three steps
17 and a mine went off underneath and behind me. It blew me up in the air. I landed on my
18 stomach. You just kind of lose it for, oh I don't know, 10 seconds and so I remember
19 getting up and running about five or six yards. And then falling and then thinking what
20 the hell are you doing. I feel down on my face and had my rifle down in front of me and I
21 was pointing it trying to figure out okay what's going on and whose coming at me where
22 and so on. At that point I could hear people start coming up behind us going, 'Okay what
23 happened? Who's hit? Where's Dant?' I guess I had gone through a little, I had gotten
24 blown up the trail a little bit and then I ran five yards and so I was kind of a little out of
25 sight of when the people came through the hedgerow behind me. Then the guys found me
26 and they set up a little perimeter and the medic started working on my leg where I had
27 caught some shrapnel and my back. I was lucky in that I mostly got hit by the concussion
28 of the thing. The dog took most of the shrapnel. If the dog hadn't of been there I probably
29 would have been much more seriously hurt.

30 RV: Do you know what kind of booby trap it was?

1 SD: I have no idea. My bet is that it was some kind of Chicom grenade of some
2 kind but it could have been, I mean I don't know. It could have been some handmade
3 thing.

4 RV: Nevertheless it doesn't matter.

5 SD: Yeah, right.

6 RV: It worked.

7 SD: It worked. Whether it was trip wire or hell, it may have been just something
8 that just had been laying in that hedgerow waiting for somebody to bump it to come out.
9 Maybe it wasn't a mine at all; a piece of ordnance that never went off and you know, we
10 just rustled it free. But my bet is that it was some kind of mine that had been planted near
11 that hedgerow next to the trail and you know I still believe to this day if I hadn't lost my
12 cool and I hadn't been pissed off at the time I would have gone much more carefully
13 through that hedgerow and maybe spotted something.

14 RV: Right. So what was the result there? You've come to a rest your days, what's
15 going on?

16 SD: What do you mean, after I'm hit?

17 RV: Yes. I mean, are you evacuated? What'd you do?

18 SD: Yes. I had a bunch of scrapes and cuts in my back and two pretty good sized
19 holes in the back of my left leg. I was lucky it didn't hit an artery or anything, so it ended
20 up kind of being big flesh wounds.

21 RV: Right.

22 SD: And so they tied those off and the dog handler had been hit. The mine had
23 gone off in front of him. I think he lost an eye through the whole thing. So anyway they
24 called for a dustoff and happened to be a LOH flying over the area. I think it was
25 probably the same guy who had spotted the activity on the hillside that we were headed
26 for. So he radioed in that he was in the area and that he would pick up us. So we had to
27 walk a couple hundred yards to some place where he could land. They put us on a LOH
28 helicopter and flew us back to Chu Lai.

29 RV: When you got back to Chu Lai what happened?

30 SD: Well they met us with a couple of, well they weren't gurneys, I don't know
31 what they were, some kind of cots that they put you on and that's where I lost touch.

1 The dog was pretty beat up. I noticed that when we were riding back in the helicopter. I
2 asked the handler how he was doing. He goes, 'Other than my eye, I think I'm okay.' He
3 was kind of stunned. We got off on a tarmac and a couple of...I guess it was a doctor and
4 probably a nurse and a few orderlies or whatever hauled me into the operating room and
5 they wanted to know where I was hit and I told them and so they had kind of gone over
6 the whole area. At some point I noticed in the operating room that everybody kind of
7 relaxed. I kind of thought well that's a pretty good sign. It must just be something that
8 they're going to sew me up and set me free and that's pretty much what happened. I
9 remember the doctors that were operating on me, it seemed like one of these guys was
10 coming on to the nurse.

11 RV: Oh really. One of the doctors? You remember this.

12 SD: Yes. I thought it was funny and she was kind of cute. You know I hadn't seen
13 a round eye in a while so that was kind of neat. But they patched me up. I think that the
14 wounds were big enough that they really couldn't do much in terms of stitching. They
15 had to wait a couple of days before they could do that. So they put a lot of gauze and
16 disinfectant and wrapped a good part of my upper back thigh and sent me back to my
17 company, oh what do you call it, back to the compound. The top sergeant was kind of
18 surprised to see me. He thought I would be in the hospital for a couple of days. After I
19 had been back there a couple of days he started putting me on guard duty and I don't
20 think he was supposed to do that because I was having to report like to an aid station like
21 a couple times a day to have these bandages changed because they were more afraid of
22 anything, like a lot of things over there. The biggest problem with my wounds is the
23 danger of getting infected and trying to keep them clean. So he sent me out on guard duty
24 one night and my wounds started oozing and the bandages were getting all wet and
25 leaking and so he had to call back to the rear to get somebody to replace me. He was
26 pretty pissed about that. But then when I went back to the medic station and they'd found
27 out that I had been put out on guard duty that doctor who was there really went after Top
28 and told him, 'This guy is not to be on any kind of duty like that, very light around the
29 compound and if he ends up getting an infection I'm holding you personally responsible.'

30 RV: Wow.

1 SD: So he left me alone after that. I think that Top had a little more respect for
2 what had happened. I think I was in the rear a month or so.

3 RV: Steve, hold on. What was it like being in the rear versus being in the field?
4 That's got to be a pretty big difference.

5 SD: It was especially different for me because I was recuperating. I really didn't
6 have a job. I mean it was wonderful being in the rear and not being out in the field but I
7 was also bored as hell.

8 RV: What did you do with yourself?

9 SD: I did have some light duty that I had to perform, like helping the company
10 clerk out with some stuff, you know typing and some filing and that kind of thing. I
11 would run errands. I would clean up the compound. I went every night to the EM club
12 and drank about 18 beers. I read a lot.

13 RV: Do you remember what you were reading?

14 SD: No, just picking up novels. Just kind of killing time.

15 RV: Did you want to get back out there with the unit? Or were you good to go?

16 SD: Ultimately I wanted to get back to my unit. I kind of felt between being bored
17 and I felt guilty after a while. I would see these guys come back and, well it was just
18 good to see them again. I did end up going and spending a couple of weeks as I
19 remember. You know I wasn't quite ready to go back to the field but I could go
20 someplace where I could have some fairly heavy duty. So they sent me out to some
21 firebase to pull guard duty for a couple of weeks. At that point I said, I think it was at that
22 point I said, 'Look, I want to get back to my unit.' So a couple of days after that they flew
23 me back to Chu Lai and my unit was coming in on stand down and that's when I rejoined
24 them and I went back to the field.

25 RV: Okay. What was your reception like when you got back out there?

26 SD: They thought that I was out of my freaking mind.

27 RV: (Laughter) Because you wanted back or you came back?

28 SD: Because I came back, yeah. Maybe I was. You know I don't know why I did
29 it to this day but it just felt like it was the right thing to do at the time.

1 RV: Well when you got back out where you as aggressive, less aggressive, were
2 you the same? What were you like in the field? Were you kind of looking a little more
3 carefully or trying to not lose your temper or focus more?

4 SD: I don't remember, you know, being any different in the field than when I was
5 before. I guess, I don't remember this, but I guess we all learn our lessons. I do remember
6 that that sergeant wasn't around anymore. I don't know what happened to him and I don't
7 even remember who the sergeant was. I must have been walking point again, but you
8 know your most vivid memories are probably kind of like the rest of life. You remember
9 a lot of times when the places that you really screw up are the things that really stand out
10 in your mind as opposed as the times that you were doing things, doing something and
11 walking point and nothing happened. And there were a lot of those days.

12 RV: So that was the most common day basically?

13 SD: Pardon me?

14 RV: That was the most common day basically?

15 SD: The most common day of being out and walking point as I said earlier is a lot
16 of adrenaline and the focus that you have is just very intense. Your eyes are just; well just
17 everything about you is very intense. You're trying to see everything, hear everything,
18 notice everything that's out in front of you and on your periphery. I mean just taking care
19 to make sure that you're not walking into an ambush or that you're not about to hit a
20 mine.

21 RV: Right. Well are there any more incidents that come to mind? I mean that's
22 major one. What else after this point as far as contact or just things that happened that
23 come to mind now that you remember?

24 SD: There were a couple other incidents that come biggest to mind. One, and I
25 think I mentioned this earlier in this meeting, in Dragon Valley, which was...and if you
26 were to hand me a map I would probably have a hard time finding it. We walked into this
27 area and I wasn't walking point by then so I was probably in country maybe three
28 months. In fact come to think about it walking out of there was the first time I had walked
29 point. I had forgotten about that. Anyway, a valley that China's hills on, as you're
30 walking in, hills up in front of us and to the right of us, kind of almost a semi-circle of
31 hills that you're walking into. We started taking a lot of incoming. We set ourselves up in

1 a defensive position. We called in artillery on the hillside that we thought the fire was
2 coming from. And that calmed down for a while and then I remembered we decided to
3 stay there for the night. Why we decided to do that when we weren't on the high ground
4 was beyond me. Sometime that night we were taking more incoming off and on and the
5 next morning there was a lot of commotion because in the early morning hours or during
6 one of the exchanges of fire discovered that a guy that was about three foxholes down
7 from mine had been shot in the head and killed. We had a couple of other people that
8 were wounded and then sometime after we had discovered that and people were moving
9 around, then I think we started taking fire again. A guy from, I was in 3rd Squad, a guy in
10 1st Squad got shot in the stomach so we were calling in a dustoff. I still see Jerry at these.
11 I met Jerry for the first time in 30 years at this reunion a couple of years ago so we called
12 in a dustoff and a helicopter came in and landed probably 25, 30 yards in front of the
13 position that I was in. Me and I think two or three other guys were ordered to get Jerry
14 onto a poncho liner and a doc was still treating him and when the dustoff landed we were
15 told to carry him out to the helicopter and none of us were very happy about that. We
16 were taking fire and we knew we were going to be running him out there in the middle of
17 this open field. We all loved Jerry to death but we weren't sure we liked him that much.

18 RV: What did you say to him when you saw him at the reunion for the first time?

19 SD: God I don't know. We just kind of hugged each other for a while. I said,
20 'How are you doing?' He said, 'I'm doing fine.' He remembered...I had a nickname in
21 the field. My last name is Dant and Jerry hung this on me. There's a bourbon that's made
22 in Kentucky, a small distillery called JW Dant and they make mostly bourbons but they
23 make some other stuff and apparently Jerry used to drink some of the stuff in his wilder
24 days and so when we first met he started calling me JW. Pretty soon the whole company
25 was calling me JW. So that's the name I went by for the entire time I was in the field. So
26 when I saw him 30 years later he goes, 'JW, how you doing?' and my wife goes, 'Honey,
27 you told me that but I really didn't believe it until somebody called you that.'

28 RV: (Laughter) How did that make you feel after that long hearing that again?

29 SD: Strange, very weird. You know you get away from this for 30 years and you
30 go did I really go through this all again so when you hear something like that it kind of
31 validates the fact that, okay I guess I really was there and I did do all this shit.

1 RV: Do you look back, are you sometimes amazed at, ‘Wow, I survived that. I
2 made it through something intense.’

3 SD: Every day.

4 RV: Really?

5 SD: Yes. You know after...I still can’t believe I did some of the things that I did
6 in Vietnam.

7 RV: What, the crazy stuff or just the fire fights?

8 SD: Well just the experience in itself. I mean that I actually went through that.
9 That I actually was in a firefight, was walking point, was pinned down in a valley, all of
10 that. Life in the United States of America is a very good place to be. After you have been
11 through an experience like Vietnam.

12 RV: I can only imagine. I want to talk about that when we get to the point
13 chronologically, after you come home and spend doing some reflection. Did you think at
14 the time in Vietnam about something like that, that, ‘God, I just want to get through this
15 and get on with my life,’?

16 SD: Absolutely. You know it’s why I turned down a number of times that I could
17 get out of the field. You know where the Army would come offer you to come back to
18 the States to go to school if you’ll reup for another two years or something. You know
19 join...go back and go to officer candidate school which would have gotten you out of
20 Vietnam for a while or go learn to fly a helicopter or whatever. But you know I think I
21 said earlier I just you know wanted to get this obligation over with as quickly as I
22 possibly could. You know I think if the times had been different...If, if the military
23 wasn’t held in such disgust by a lot of people, especially my peer group.

24 RV: And you’re talking about the media?

25 SD: Well I’m talking about the media. I’m talking about the way you got treated
26 when you came home. I think I mentioned about...people like Senator Kerry didn’t help.
27 The military was just you know not held in high regard. I think if that had been different
28 you know I could have seen myself as staying in the military. And looking back on it now
29 there is no way I could have seen myself doing that at the time but as I look back at it
30 now you know I think the military should have been held in higher regard and it was a

1 shame that the country treated its military forces the way it did in those couple of
2 decades.

3 RV: Well did you all feel negative effects or rather, what effects did you feel if
4 any from the anti war movement while you were in country?

5 SD: I guess there was, oh boy a lot of mixed emotions. You know I had friends
6 back in the States who were very anti war. I think I said this earlier, they were trying to
7 convince me when I was about to get drafted that I should go to Canada and I understood
8 their viewpoint. Before I was getting drafted I wasn't thinking that this war was some
9 place we ought to be and we ought to be working our ways to get out of it. So I
10 understood where those folks were coming from. But on the other hand I never
11 understood why you would hold it against...you would hold the politics of the Vietnam
12 War against the soldiers that were fighting it. So there were a lot of us who were very
13 confused about that issue. You know I didn't understand why if I had gone and done
14 what I thought I was supposed to do that I had supposedly done something wrong.

15 RV: Right. Did you know that, 'No; I had not done anything wrong, what's going
16 on?'

17 SD: Right. And I also understood how you know I think, at least it hit me hard, I
18 mean when I was over there Kent State happened and I just couldn't believe that it had
19 gotten to the point back here in the States where you know National Guard were firing on
20 students. I mean Jesus Christ. It just blew my mind that a guard unit would find a group
21 of students intimidating. And I guess that's because I had been in the field and I was up
22 against some real people who were intimidating. How can you fire on your own folks? It
23 was just absurd.

24 RV: Steve let's talk about a couple of things in country. You were made squad
25 leader. Can you tell me about that and why and how that happened?

26 SD: Can I go back to Dragon Valley for a second?

27 RV: Of course you can. Absolutely.

28 SD: Because the guy that got put on the helicopter ended up getting a Silver Star
29 out of that. After we got him on the helicopter the helicopter got about 15 feet off the
30 ground and it was shot back down. So we had to go back out and get Jerry out and get the
31 helicopter crew out and get them back to our perimeter line. At that point we were taking,

1 obviously we were taking incoming if the helicopter got shot down, but at that point the
2 helicopter gunships came in. We had, I think they were F-14 fighters dropping napalm on
3 the hillsides while we were attempting to get another helicopter in and get Jerry out of
4 there and get the helicopter crew out of there. So as the second helicopter crew...the
5 second helicopter came in to land on the other side of the first helicopter, my squad went
6 out and went out in front of the helicopter between the helicopter and the wood line, were
7 laying down a base of fire along with the gunships that were in the area. But the gunships
8 had to kind of lay off for a little bit because they wanted to make sure they didn't hit the
9 helicopter. And we started taking fire again. We got the helicopter up in the air and Jerry
10 got a Silver Star because he had his M-16 with him and he's firing at the wood line from
11 the helicopter with a bullet in his stomach.

12 RV: Wow.

13 SD: Which was a rather amazing feat I thought...and so then we got back and
14 then we got another helicopter in to take the broken helicopter out and then we spent one
15 more night there and we started walking out of the valley with I think a lot of gunships
16 overhead trying to protect our flanks. The first squad that Jerry was in at that point had
17 been walking a lot of point. Their point guy hit a mine as we were coming out of this
18 valley. So I think that they had between Jerry and a couple other guys that had like, one
19 guy killed and two or three guys wounded during this whole thing. So at that point we
20 decided that we needed to get off the trail and they brought my squad up and that's when
21 I started walking point. So we cut our way through this pretty heavy jungle probably for I
22 don't know a quarter of a mile until we came out into an open area and we could see a
23 village down below and lots of people running away from us. A couple of guys said,
24 'Open fire, open fire,' And I couldn't tell...as far as I could tell I would have been
25 shooting at women and I didn't want to do that so we went down to the village and ended
26 up looking for weapons and found a lot of weapons and tunnels and the whole nine yards.
27 As I remember they brought another company in and they kind of took over from there
28 and they kind of flew us out of there at that point. I remember Dragon Valley a lot.

29 RV: What else happened there that you remember?

30 SD: Well that's pretty much...it probably was the biggest sustained, off and on
31 sustaining firefight that I was in during the time I was in Vietnam. One guy killed and a

1 few people wounded. I had heard later that a number of companies had gone in there and
2 gone out of there and had gotten out of there having received the same kind of treatment.
3 It was another example to me of why don't we just, if that valley is so bad why don't we
4 attack it with force?

5 RV: You all were discussing that or you were thinking this?

6 SD: I was thinking that. What are you dragging us in there for to end up being
7 where you're at a disadvantage because they got the high ground? You know you're
8 almost like you draw the fire and we'll bring the gunships in and you know, we'll wipe
9 them out by heavy artillery. Well they're shooting from, you know, inside jungle
10 canopies. It's hard to see those guys. You got to go in there with enough force to clear the
11 whole thing out.

12 RV: What would have done that? What kind of force would have taken care of
13 that?

14 SD: Well I would think a couple of companies where you can really work your
15 way through the jungle. There was another incident where I was in country, we're
16 operating out in the same area and you we stumbled across what ended up being an NVA
17 base camp. It was the only time that while I was in country that the tactics of how we
18 were going to approach this place changed. In that we, and I wasn't walking point that
19 day, the squad who had been the point squad found this. They were on the periphery of
20 what they thought was you know a number of hooches that looked like VC or NVA. We
21 went on line, switched to go on line; do you know what I mean by that?

22 RV: Yes, but go ahead and describe that for people who will not know.

23 SD: If you're facing up a hill, which is what we were and it was a pretty heavy
24 wooded area but it wasn't really jungle. To my right if I'm facing up the hill there would
25 be a line of soldiers, we would be spaced going out probably the nearest soldier to me is
26 probably five, six yards away on my right and the next soldier is on the right of him
27 another five or six yards and so on and so forth but on my left the line strings out just the
28 same way in the opposite direction. So we're going to march up this, not march, we're
29 going to go up this hill in an on line attack position. And you use to see a lot of that stuff
30 when you watch World War II movies and you know World War I movies, but you didn't
31 see a lot of it in Vietnam because normally you're walking in a vertical line as opposed to

1 horizontal line and it's a lot of guerilla warfare so you're getting attacked and laying
2 down. This was really taking an offensive position. So none of us had ever really done
3 this, except for back end in boot camp, never had done it in Vietnam. We were all very
4 nervous as what we were going to find at the top of this hill. We got up there and a few
5 shots were fired and I think we killed, it wasn't my squad, but a squad down a, I don't
6 remember if it was right or left, but killed a couple of what turned out to be NVA and
7 suddenly we were upon a...there must have been, oh I don't know, 15 or 20 hooches that
8 were all very well kept. One of them was a hospital with all of the operating tools and
9 gurneys and IVs. And there were tunnels everywhere. So this was a pretty big deal. I
10 think we were operating at...I don't remember if we were operating at company or
11 platoon level. But we suddenly realized in being amongst all these hooches that, at least
12 in my mind, that there weren't enough of us. (Laughter)

13 RV: Right. You could sense that basically.

14 SD: We could sense that we had stumbled upon something that was bigger than
15 us. We were trying to blow stuff up as much as we possibly could with the ordnance that
16 we had but I...at least I did and I know the guys in my squad wanted to get the hell out of
17 there before all the people who obviously had been here earlier came back and wanted
18 their stuff back. So we called in artillery but I think what was ultimately decided – and
19 we heard it because it was getting towards nightfall so we started coming off the hill.
20 This thing was on top of a very big hill, but it was probably a single canopy jungle. It
21 wasn't really thick. So we came off this trail, came off the top of this hill and found a trail
22 and really humping it down this hill. When it got dark everybody sat down, laid down on
23 the trail. We had never done this before where we didn't have enough time to set up
24 positions and we slept on that trail that night, just along the lines of that trail. Every other
25 guy was awake and then every other guy was asleep all night long but I think that they
26 eventually brought in that night...they bombed that place with B-52 bombers.

27 RV: I presume you heard that, felt that?

28 SD: Yes we heard and felt that.

29 RV: Can you describe what that felt like, what it sounded like?

1 SD: Well you know it's like...boy, if you've ever had, you know you're in a good
2 thunderstorm and you've had a bolt of lighting go off outside your window with it in your
3 yard. You know that thunder and it rattles the whole house?
4 RV: Yes.
5 SD: That's as close as I can come to describing it because when those things hit
6 the ground man they rattle the ground.
7 RV: How do you deal with that, Steve? Or is that just part of the reality of being
8 in that war?
9 SD: (Laughter)
10 RV: I mean that sounds like a silly question but do you just get used to that?
11 SD: You don't ever get use to it.
12 RV: I don't see how you could.
13 SD: Well you don't. I'll tell you a story. I was back in country, back to the States
14 for a couple of years and I was living with my girlfriend who is, I'm not sure if we were
15 engaged at the time or not. We were in bed one night. It was like one o'clock in the
16 morning or something and just such a thunderstorm as I described to you came along that
17 evening. We had a large bolt of lightening and a huge thunder and I was under the bed. I
18 mean I was off the bed and looking for a hole to crawl into.
19 RV: Wow.
20 SD: My wife kind of looked at me I mean she was a little frightened and angry all
21 at the same time. It's a funny story. I said, 'What are you mad at me for?' She goes,
22 'Well, how come you're not taking me with you?'
23 RV: (Laughter)
24 SD: 'If you're so afraid, why are you leaving me up here for?'
25 RV: (Laughter) She's got a point.
26 SD: But the point is that I guess you don't ever get use to it.
27 RV: Yes.
28 SD: Although thunder claps these days I'm not crawling under the bed anymore.
29 RV: How long did it take you to get away from that?
30 SD: Well it took me, you know for a while, for a few years I didn't want to go to
31 July 4th fireworks. By 1976, 200th anniversary of the country I guess I had been out of

1 country for four or five years and I remember going to some fireworks on that July 4th.
2 You know it took...I don't think that you and I could have had this conversation ten years
3 ago.

4 RV: Why?

5 SD: Because I just, I worked so hard for so long to just kind of put it behind me. I
6 really didn't talk about it very much at all. Until just a few years ago I had never been to
7 my unit reunion and had no urge at all to go.

8 RV: Why not? Is it part of the effort to put it behind you?

9 SD: Yes, part of the effort I think to put it behind you.

10 RV: What prompted you to go?

11 SD: 9/11.

12 RV: Really? How so?

13 SD: Yes. When that happened I just, the first thing that came to my mind was
14 'incoming'. I just couldn't believe that somebody was attacking our country.

15 RV: Emotionally did you just, 'Okay, I need to reconnect,' or how did you make
16 the connection to, 'I need to go back and deal with this issue,'?

17 SD: Well it just made a whole lot of things just come flooding back. The last
18 thing that I think that anybody who's ever been in combat, who has ever been in a war
19 zone, wants to see is that war zone come to where they live. You know most Americans
20 have no appreciation of what that can be and what that can mean and what a terrible
21 situation that it is. So when I saw those planes come over those buildings and people
22 running for their lives in New York and people jumping out of buildings, you know, I am
23 seeing a war zone. Really it just all came flooding back.

24 RV: How did you deal with it?

25 SD: Well you know I got on the Internet and I found Americal website and I
26 found the pages on that and I found the 5th of the 46th. I found 198th and I found 5th of the
27 46th. I don't know if you've been on there but on that website it has all these notices from
28 guys who have served in the units in Vietnam. You usually start with something
29 like...can you hang on one second?

30 RV: Sure.

31 SD: Needed a glass of orange juice.

1 RV: That's fine, go ahead.

2 SD: Usually starts out with something like looking for...sometimes it's specific as
3 somebody's name. In my case what I found was a notice that said, 'Looking for...'
4 something to the effect of, 'anybody from Charlie Company 5th of the 46th 198th.' I
5 looked at that and I went holy shit I can't believe somebody is out there actually looking
6 for somebody who was in that unit. I think they even said 1970s. It actually took me a
7 few days before I decided to go ahead and write back. I wrote back to, I've forgotten who
8 it was, there were two guys' names who were looking for. One of them was Dave
9 Hammond and I was living in Beaverton, Oregon, which is just outside of Portland. It
10 turns out that Dave lived like five miles from me. So I sent him a note and the next thing
11 you know we're meeting each other for the first time in I don't know, 30 years or so at a
12 little restaurant and having a beer and looking at each other's pictures.

13 RV: What was that like?

14 SD: It was very strange. I don't know that there's any way to describe it. I think
15 both Dave's wife, Christine, and my wife, Sharon, we all met that evening.

16 RV: So you didn't go by yourself, you took your wife.

17 SD: Yes, Sharon. You know because my wife is, she's very curious as to how this
18 is all going to go. We talked about this off and on for a lot of years. She's a psychologist
19 by the way. (Laughter)

20 RV: Perfect! I'm married to one also.

21 SD: Are you?

22 RV: Yes.

23 SD: She's always encouraged me to talk about this but has known that I was kind
24 of reluctant at the same time. So she was very curious as to see how this was all going to
25 go. It's funny how it all worked out because she and Christy ended up being best friends
26 almost right away.

27 RV: Really?

28 SD: Yes. Because I think the wives share in a lot of this too. They just kind of,
29 they understand probably better than anybody what you went through without having to
30 actually go there.

31 RV: Right.

1 SD: At these reunions you see almost the bond grow between the wives as much
2 as between the guys.

3 RV: I've noticed that at reunions. I've clearly seen that. What is that relationship
4 like? That's got to be very unique in and of itself. The spouses bonding over what?

5 SD: Well in many respects they are living with the same kind of, you know,
6 person. All of their husbands have got a shared experience that's kind of unique to their
7 neighbor's husband's shared experiences. So when you get together at these reunions
8 there's as much of a brotherhood amongst the guys as almost the sisterhood amongst the
9 women. You all kind of become brothers and sisters, if you will. It sounds kind of hokey
10 but I think that best describes it.

11 RV: Well that makes sense. I'm not sure people who have never been or don't
12 know would understand that. That does make sense. Steve, are you okay on time today?
13 Would you like to take a break?

14 SD: I'm okay. What time is it, 8:30. I'm okay for another ten minutes or so.

15 RV: Maybe we should leave other incidents in Dragon Valley for another
16 conversation if things come to mind that you would like to talk about I would like you to
17 discuss those. I wanted to ask you something you mentioned a few minutes ago and I
18 know you probably saw this more than one time was napalming. You know, napalm
19 being dropped. Can you describe what that's like to see that? What does it sound like,
20 feel like?

21 SD: Well first off, I just saw it a few times. Once, actually I was on stand down.
22 Chu Lai got rocketed one morning. I forgotten how many rockets came in but it was quite
23 a few. Whatever company is on stand down is kind of the reactionary company if
24 something happens to Chu Lai. We were all pissed off because what's a few God damned
25 rockets, you know. They cut our stand down short. Within half an hour of that rocket
26 attack we were on helicopters, on hueys heading out to what they thought was the
27 location of where the rockets were launched. We got out there and sure enough there
28 were a bunch of rockets there and I think we killed a couple Dinks and may have
29 captured another one. We captured a whole load of rockets. The rest of the VC – and I
30 think they were VC – had headed up into these hills. So we called in for an air strike.
31 That was the first time I had seen napalm. When you see it, it's not like any other

1 ordnance. It's coming to the ground. Napalm is, and I've only seen it coming down from
2 the air but it seems like it's a canister that's probably I don't know four, five inches wide
3 and about two or three feet long. It kind of tumbles end over end as it is coming towards
4 the ground. Then when it hits the ground there's a sheet of flame that's this thing, I guess
5 it must slide across the ground, that goes up. My sense is probably hundred yards long,
6 maybe longer than that. I thought it was great at the time. (Laughter)

7 RV: (Laughter) Why? Why did you think that?

8 SD: Well, burn those son of a bitches out. It sure as hell took care of the jungle
9 cover of the woods that they were hiding in because there wasn't much left of it after it
10 got on fire. I never saw anybody burnt by napalm or was up close any more than what I
11 just described. At that point, it was a distance. It was sheets of flame. We didn't hear any
12 more from the enemy after that, at least that day.

13 RV: I can imagine it's pretty intimidating.

14 SD: I'm glad we had it and they didn't.

15 RV: The American firepower that was able to be brought to bear on the enemy,
16 what all did that do for you all psychologically?

17 SD: You know there just never was any doubt in my mind that if push came to
18 shove in a face-to-face competition, we were going to win because we had that firepower
19 but that's why the other guys were smart not to take us on, head on. They knew that
20 would be a losing battle.

21 RV: Steve why don't we go ahead and break for the day?

22 SD: Okay.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Stephen W. Dant
Conducted by Richard Burks Verrone, Ph.D.
May 11, 2005
Transcribed by Brooke Tomlin

1 RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history interview with
2 Mr. Stephen Dant. Today is May 11, 2005 and it's about 8:29 Central Standard Time here
3 in Lubbock, Texas. Steve, you are in Colorado Springs. Steve, tell me a little bit about
4 when you became squad leader. This is right before you took a job in the rear.

5 SD: I had gone back to the field after I had been wounded and kind of found
6 myself as a, since the squad was fairly new with the exception of I think one guy, kind of
7 found myself as the de facto squad leader, if you will. Although while we were working
8 with another squad. For the most part since they had more guys that had been in the field
9 longer they were kind of taking the lead. In terms of the group of guys that I was with
10 everybody was just looking at me because well I kind of had been there longer and had
11 more experience. Then when we went back to...so we operated that way for I think a
12 couple of weeks out in the field.

13 RV: What was that like for you, being squad leader? Was it a good position to be
14 in as far as leadership?

15 SD: Well I felt like it was an awful lot of responsibility. You know I was kind of
16 proud that somebody decided that I guess I had the makings of taking over a squad but
17 it's scary at the same time because...well again, it's eight or nine guys that are kind of
18 looking at you for, 'Okay, what do we do next?' Not so much when you're with the
19 platoon or with the company because that's kind of decided by somebody with a higher
20 grade than mine but if you're out on some kind of ambush or whatever, you're the guy
21 that's responsible for making sure things happen and people come back safe.

1 RV: Well, how did you find yourself kind of functioning? Were you good, do you
2 think? Were you adequate?

3 SD: I wasn't a squad leader long enough to know that really. When the word
4 came down when I was in the rear that they wanted me over at brigade headquarters you
5 know I had a lot of mixed emotions about getting out of the field. I didn't for a moment
6 hesitate to take the rear job after being out in the field; I don't know whatever it was,
7 seven months or whatever.

8 RV: It was a pretty easy decision?

9 SD: Oh yes. I did feel guilty about leaving all those guys behind. They would
10 have thought I was crazy if I would have stayed because there wasn't anybody who
11 wouldn't have traded me.

12 RV: Were they happy for you?

13 SD: Oh yes. Everybody was happy for me and I was happy for myself.

14 RV: Do you remember what they were saying to you?

15 SD: 'You lucky son of a bitch. I hope you remember us when we come back to
16 the rear.' I mean everybody, it's kind of a thing where everybody gives you a hard time
17 but they're laughing about it at the same time.

18 RV: How was it saying goodbye? What do you say to people like that who are
19 going to be staying behind and fighting that kind of war?

20 SD: As I'm remembering you give everybody a hug and you tell them when they
21 get back on stand down to come look you up so you can go have a beer with them at the
22 EM club. I remember when I was at the rear when Charlie Company used to come back
23 on stand down. Now when you're in the rear, you got a hooch. You lived in a Quonset
24 hut. It was divided in two by a wall in the middle and then there were four bunks on each
25 side, so you were bunking with three other guys. It was a pretty nice arrangement after
26 being in the field. I use to invite guys back to my hooch when Charlie Company was on
27 stand down. I would go out and buy a couple of bottles of bourbon or scotch or whatever
28 and some beer and we would sit around drinking and they would crash and burn at my
29 place as opposed to down at the company stand down area.

30 RV: So you actually did see them again?

1 SD: Oh yeah. As time went on I knew less and less of the people who were in the
2 company because a lot of guys were rotating out. I ended up extending my tour duty
3 since I had a rear job because if you come back home, if you come back to the States with
4 less than five months active duty left, they don't assign you to a base you just sign out of
5 the Army.

6 RV: Let's talk about what happened in the rear. What was your job, your
7 assignment exactly?

8 SD: I was a driver for brigade S3, which is Operations. So I was a driver for this
9 major who was head of S3 and from time to time drove around some other officers from
10 brigade headquarters.

11 RV: Where was this? Where was brigade headquarters?

12 SD: It was in Chu Lai. I was a gofer. You know, go for this, go for that. I ran a lot
13 of errands. I pulled guard duty at night probably, and I don't remember exactly but I
14 probably had guard duty like three times a week out on the Chu Lai perimeter.

15 RV: You want to describe what guard duty was? What did you do?

16 SD: You went out to an area that was out on the perimeter. Most of the time we
17 were out on an area that we're kind of staring out a few hundred-yard expanse into the
18 village of Chu Lai. We were in an elevated...there were bunkers underneath and then
19 there was an elevated observation platform that was built that had a roof on it and a
20 couple of radios in there. I think there were four guys that were assigned to a bunker
21 every night. I can't remember if that's right, three or four guys. So you had a couple
22 hours on and a couple of hours off, that kind of deal. You were looking for VC trying to
23 get onto the base. I can only remember a couple of times when I was out there that
24 something was going on and neither time was it in the area that I was assigned to. Chu
25 Lai was a pretty large base. I've forgotten. It must have been miles long, probably a few
26 miles wide as it extended along the coastline, so you could have dinks in a wire and be a
27 couple miles away from where that was happening. One of the unique things was we had
28 the village all out in front of us in our position. It was amazing, at dawn every morning
29 like clockwork the entire village would come out into this field. It must have been a half a
30 mile between our perimeter and the village. The people in the village, they would all go
31 to the bathroom at the same place at the same time, every morning, it was like a

1 communal bathroom break that happened in front of the entire line. We always found that
2 amazing.

3 RV: They would come out in the same place, same time?

4 SD: Same time every morning. Hundreds of them, I mean it was amazing.

5 RV: You were out there on guard duty watching this.

6 SD: Watching all of this, right.

7 RV: Okay.

8 SD: Strange things happen in Vietnam.

9 RV: Yeah I can only imagine. Tell me what other incidents happened. You said
10 there were only a couple of times where you felt like there was something going on when
11 you were out there.

12 SD: Really it was kind of mundane duty. Compared to being in the field, anything
13 that you did in a rear was a cake job. I mean that's why I extended to stay over there for a
14 couple of months. A, I could get out of active duty earlier and B, I found out where my
15 orders were for Ft. Hood, Texas which means I was going to be riding half track or tank
16 around in Texas some place playing war games. I just couldn't see myself putting up with
17 that bull shit after going through what I went through in the field in Vietnam. Besides like
18 I said...I mean, the chances of you getting hurt in the rear like Chu Lai, having a rear job,
19 there's more chance you'll get killed in an automobile accident on the roads in the U.S.
20 Having a job in the rear and having a job and being out in the bush are just; I mean it's
21 180 degrees in terms of the experience.

22 RV: What about getting rocketed and attacked at the base?

23 SD: We had a few rocket attacks. In the time that I was in the rear you know I
24 think you could have probably counted them on, I don't know there couldn't have been
25 more than five or six times where rockets were fired into the base. The VC who I assume
26 were firing the rockets, you know I never felt like they have a very good aim. They
27 would come into the perimeter. I don't ever remember hearing that somebody got hurt
28 from a rocket attack that came into Chu Lai, at least when I was in the rear. They landed
29 someplace where they didn't cause very much damage.

30 RV: So when that did happen, that was pretty relatively tame, they were just kind
31 of lobbing them in?

1 SD: People would head for their bunkers. I think that there was some type of
2 detail that was supposed to react to get out to further secure the perimeter. I don't ever
3 remember doing that, but I could have. I just don't remember.

4 RV: Steve why don't you go ahead and describe your quarters and kind of your
5 basic living area, where you would eat, your basic amenities, things like that.

6 SD: Well as I said my quarters in the rear was a Quonset hut. It was made of
7 metal. It was a building that had two rooms, basically. There was a wall in the middle that
8 cut it in half and then there were four guys that lived in each room and we each had a
9 small bed, similar to the same kind of bed you had in basic. I think I had scrounged some
10 bookshelves some place and we all had our footlockers. We managed to buy a small
11 refrigerator where we kept mostly beer. I purchased through some catalog company that
12 was affiliated with the base or something a reel-to-reel, a Sony reel-to-reel music system
13 with speakers and microphones and the whole nine yards. Almost every Quonset hutch,
14 every hooch, I swear had some type of reel-to-reel music system.

15 RV: What kind of music did you all listen to? What did you hear?

16 SD: Well we listened to Armed Forces Radio during the day usually, but at night
17 we...you could order tapes and people would share tapes and you dubbed them. I mean
18 we listened to all the music of whatever was going on back home.

19 RV: What songs come to mind? What do you remember?

20 SD: *We Got to Get Out of This Place*. You know a lot of Eric Clapton, a lot of
21 Janice Joplin; a lot of you know, the Beatles, just all of the groups, the Rolling Stones,
22 just all of the groups that were very popular at the time.

23 RV: What else would you all do for entertainment?

24 SD: Well we spent a lot of time at the EM club just telling stories and bull shitting
25 with each other. Meals were mostly taken at the mess hall. There were issues...the
26 biggest problem in the rear I thought were the race problems.

27 RV: Really?

28 SD: Yes.

29 RV: What happened?

30 SD: There was a lot of tension between the black and I saw them as really kind of
31 militant and belligerent black guys who for whatever reason, you know I guess some of

1 them had some very good reasons, but had real chips on their shoulders and seemed like
2 were always looking for trouble. A lot of black power salutes. I know that there were
3 times they would refuse to salute officers. It just created a tension that just always seemed
4 to be there. It got to a point sometimes where you really, if you were going to walk back
5 to your hooch you better be with a couple other guys as opposed to walking alone.

6 RV: Really? It was that dangerous?

7 SD: Yes.

8 RV: Wow. When did you ever see any incidents, fights or people getting in each
9 other's face and arguing about this stuff?

10 SD: I think I told you about the incident where we came back on when I was out
11 in the field and we came back on stand down and one of our guys got beat up by a few
12 black guys in the EM club; almost caused a riot. I never got in a fight in the rear. I used to
13 like to play, when you were talking about what did you used to do for entertainment, I
14 used to play a lot of basketball. I wasn't a great player but I was a pretty good player. I
15 could hold my own. I was usually on one of the 'A' pick-up teams and there were quite a
16 few scuffles on the basketball court between sometimes the white guys and the black
17 guys. Push would come to shove and a lot of threats, 'We're coming to get you later,' but
18 I never saw anything like that really come to pass.

19 RV: Okay. A lot of people say the culture, the attitude of the United States kind of
20 came to Vietnam with you all. Would you say that's true or not?

21 SD: I guess if you look at race relations and the tensions that were going back in
22 the States at the time, yeah I guess you'd have to say some of that showed up in Chu Lai
23 for sure.

24 RV: Steve, tell me about, you mentioned going to the EM club. What was the deal
25 in the rear with drinking and drugs? What did you see?

26 SD: Well I saw a lot more...hang on one second. There were a lot more drugs in
27 the rear. When I was in the field we just, it was just a given that you weren't going to be
28 smoking any dope or doing whatever drug that you were going to be doing if you were
29 out in the field. I just did not see any drugs, anybody smoking any pot or whatever when
30 we were out in the field. In the rear though there were a lot of drugs but I'm not sure it
31 was any more prevalent than what was going on back at the States at the time. You're

1 talking about the culture of what was going on in America following us to Vietnam. I
2 think that's probably true with regard to drugs as well. There was a lot of pot that was
3 being smoked in the rear. There was a lot of beer getting drunk in the EM club. But when
4 I got back to the States we went out and hung out at bars too and drank beer so I'm not
5 sure it was that much different than what was going on back here. The difference was the
6 purity of the drugs that were available there. I knew of a guy who was hooked on heroine
7 and his habit in Vietnam cost him probably a buck a day or something, but he went back
8 to the States and that same habit was costing him instead of 50 bucks a month, maybe
9 costing him 500 bucks a month so he couldn't afford to live here. I never met one of
10 these guys but the stories that were going around were guys would re-up or volunteer to
11 come back to Vietnam and they would live in the rear if they could...but by coming back
12 to Vietnam and again the jobs in the rear weren't all that tough. You could afford a
13 heroine habit more than you could afford it back in the States. I did know a couple of
14 guys a couple hooches down from me that had a problem that they were gong to have to
15 deal with when they got back. It was no question that these guys were doing some kind of
16 heroine or sticking something in their arm.

17 RV: What was morale like? Did this effect morale?

18 SD: Well I don't think morale was very high in 1970 and early 1971 in Chu Lai. I
19 don't think that the drug issues affected morale as much as how the war was being
20 fought. I'll tell you what affected morale more than the drugs were the racial issues.
21 Again it just brought a...it wasn't like being out in the field, don't get me wrong, but
22 there was a certain tension that was prevalent. That's certainly had an impact on morale, I
23 thought. It wasn't all, and I don't want to give anybody the wrong impression, it wasn't
24 all of the black guys that had chips on their shoulders, but there were more than a few
25 that felt that...they were pissed off at the world for reasons that I can only surmise and I
26 wouldn't pretend to explain.

27 RV: Did you all have access to religious services in the rear?

28 SD: Yes.

29 RV: Did you partake?

30 SD: No. I'm not a...well I was brought up Catholic but I've become kind of an
31 agnostic. Actually when I was in the field it always bothered me when somebody would

1 say, 'Well, what's going to happen is going to happen,' or you know, 'If there's a bullet
2 with my name on it you know I guess it's preordained.' I always kind of felt like I wanted
3 somebody around me who felt like they had more control of their situation than leaving it
4 up to a deity someplace. I didn't want to believe that if we didn't work hard that we could
5 get done what needed to get done and get out of there. It was going to be up to us and not
6 somebody else.

7 RV: Well is the saying true that there are no atheists in foxholes?

8 SD: Yeah somewhat. Even though I consider myself as an agnostic I think I had
9 some kind of Buddha thing around my neck. I think I had a rosary. I was covering all the
10 bases (laughing).

11 RV: Just in case.

12 SD: Just in case.

13 RV: Well, did you talk to ministers or were they around, any of the chaplains?

14 SD: We had a chaplain come out in the field. If we were out in the field on
15 a...well, I won't say every Sunday but you know we'd probably see a chaplain in the
16 field a couple times a month. I don't remember what dominations that they were and
17 most of the guys who were out in the field if a service was held whatever it was it would
18 be attended. It would be pretty heavily attended wherever we were. Strange sometimes
19 they would be out in the middle of a field and sometimes they would be in the jungle.
20 I've forgotten how many helicopter flights I've taken.

21 RV: Yes. Well on another subject, what kind of contact did you all have in the
22 rear with women?

23 SD: Mostly with Vietnamese women; very rarely with American women. We
24 would see them every once in a while over at the USO. I always thought they were kind
25 of weird.

26 RV: The American women?

27 SD: Yes.

28 RV: Why?

29 SD: I don't know. Just...some of them were goody two-shoes and that kind of
30 stuff. I didn't hang around the USO a lot. I only went over there when I wanted a piece of
31 information or a newspaper from someplace or something like that. Occasionally you

1 would see Army nurses but not very often. Most of the women that we came in contact
2 with were Vietnamese women, particularly the women that worked on the base. Each of
3 us had a Vietnamese girl who would clean up our hooch. We called them hooch maids.
4 They would shine our shoes and make our beds and sweep out the hooch and I've
5 forgotten it cost us...nothing. Maybe a buck a week or something, I don't remember.
6 Maybe it was more than that, but it was cheap.

7 RV: Did you trust them?

8 SD: Yes. Well, I trusted the girls that worked with us. They were very nice. I
9 sensed they had an education. For some reason this sticks in my mind, I think they were
10 Catholic. But I had heard some stories about some guys who had gotten ripped off by
11 their hooch maids, but I think that they knew if they did that they weren't going to be on
12 the base. They would get fired, and it was a good job for them.

13 RV: What about the stories of the civilians being members of the Viet Cong, the
14 ones who could go on base?

15 SD: Well I didn't see that. I didn't run into very many...well, I did see some
16 civilians from time to time down at the PX, but most of the civilians that I knew on the
17 base were women. Could they have been Viet Cong or could they have Viet Cong
18 members in their family? I guess so. My sense is that they liked the fact that we were
19 there.

20 RV: The civilians did.

21 SD: The civilians did. I felt badly when the U.S. ultimately left there. Those
22 people, if they lost that war, they were going to get hurt.

23 RV: You definitely had that idea while you were there?

24 SD: Oh yeah. The North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were going to, there was
25 going to be a price to pay by the South Vietnamese if we left. There was no question in
26 my mind.

27 RV: How did you feel about that at the time?

28 SD: Well I don't know. I guess you can tell. It's a lot of mixed emotions about
29 that you know because you feel badly for them but again you know when I was in the
30 field and I was working with ARVN troops, I never felt like that they were truly gung ho
31 about defending their country. So on the one hand you feel sorry for the people that you

1 met in the rear who you felt like their hearts were in the right place yet you felt like this
2 was a group of people who, or a country that for whatever reason couldn't take care of
3 itself.

4 RV: Why do you think that was the case?

5 SD: To this day I don't understand that mind set. Again I don't want to generalize
6 everything. Because there were the Kit Carson scouts that we worked with and those
7 guys were good at what they did and they were gung ho, but my sense was that the rank
8 and file soldier that was in the South Vietnamese Army was not very capable. I just don't
9 get it. The Korean troops that I ran into there, I mean they were a gung ho bunch of
10 people. I ran into Australians just once or twice. I mean those guys were good soldiers.
11 The Americans I think were good soldiers. But the people that we were fighting for had
12 the worst army in the field. You know it's just another example of how Vietnam was just
13 so screwed up. I've read other things since I've been there. We should have done a better
14 job I guess of helping those people help themselves than we did.

15 RV: How do you think we could have done it differently?

16 SD: I don't know. Again that's a higher pay grade than I was. I think maybe if we
17 had I don't know, forced the issue more. It's like raising a child: if you do everything for
18 them, the child never really takes responsibility for himself or herself. I think maybe we
19 took too much responsibility and should have forced the issue with the Vietnamese to
20 take on a bigger load. I don't know if that would have worked or not. It's one of those
21 seems to me issues.

22 RV: What was that like for morale? That must have not been very...

23 SD: Well that's part of what affected morale and you wondered why you were
24 there if those people wouldn't do a better job of fighting for themselves. It was a morale
25 issue in the field. You get depressed but it's one of those things where you kind of shake
26 your head. What the hell are we doing here if these guys won't stick up for themselves
27 better than what they're doing?

28 RV: That's got to be difficult.

29 SD: But at the same time you felt sorry for them because you knew what was
30 going to happen, you know.

1 RV: Did you all really know that they're just going to get their butts kicked or did
2 you think, 'Okay we don't really know exactly what the end game will be. They might do
3 it, '?

4 SD: I knew if we left they were going to get their ass kicked.

5 RV: Really?

6 SD: Absolutely.

7 RV: Why so certain?

8 SD: I knew that in 1970 when I was in the field.

9 RV: Really?

10 SD: Yes.

11 RV: Tell me why so certain.

12 SD: Well just kind of what I was saying before. I mean, there was this one time
13 we were out in the field with a, a few times we were operating but I do remember the one
14 time we were operating with them and we got into a short firefight. The VC attempted or
15 maybe it was ARVN attempted to ambush us. We returned fire and as I remember the
16 firefight was kind of short lived as most of them were. And you turn around and those
17 guys are gone. (Laughter) So it's just, I mean it's their country. They should know how to
18 take on this enemy better than we do. And yet they never showed that.

19 RV: Were you guys like, 'What the hell is this?'

20 SD: 'What the hell is this,' that's exactly right. So that's why I say I knew if we'd
21 left that those guys, you know they weren't going to be able to stand up to the...the VC
22 were, you know you had to give them some. They never gave up. I mean they persevered.
23 They just kept coming at you in little bitty skirmishes. Like they say, there wasn't a battle
24 in Vietnam that was won by the VC or the North Vietnamese, the NVA. And it was the
25 same thing with most skirmishes. Only one time that I know that the VC...well twice, in
26 the time that I was there that you could say that they won that one. I mean the rest of the
27 time, out of all the firefights and ambushes and everything, at best it was a draw and
28 usually there was some kind of, you know, I won't say usually but often times there was
29 some kind of blood trail leading back from where they had attacked us.

30 RV: But did that matter?

31 SD: What do you mean?

1 RV: So you killed five of them or two of them, you wound two or three. Did you
2 all think that mattered or that was significant? I'm kind of playing Devil's Advocate here.

3 SD: No I understand what you're saying. It did and it didn't matter. I guess my
4 point is that those guys never gave up in trying to win their cause. No matter how, what's
5 the word I'm searching for?

6 RV: No matter what they faced, the amount of the difficulties.

7 SD: Well that's right. The fact that they just couldn't beat the U.S. Army. I mean
8 they just kept coming. They didn't become demoralized by the fact that they would be
9 doing all this hit and run stuff and not getting anywhere, at least militarily.

10 RV: Why do you think they did that?

11 SD: But my point is that they had a lot of perseverance but I don't think the South
12 Vietnamese had that same kind of characteristic. I think that the South Vietnamese [Viet
13 Cong] and the NVA were just adamant that however long it took that they were going to
14 win this thing. I never understood that if you really believed in your country and your
15 people and what you were fighting for, why the South Vietnamese didn't feel as fervently
16 about this issue as the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong.

17 RV: What was up with that? Why would they continue coming at you guys?

18 SD: You mean the VC?

19 RV: Yeah, the NVA and the VC. Why the persistence, in your mind?

20 SD: Well because they felt like, they believed in what they were doing. They just
21 believed in their cause, at least in my mind, they believed in their cause more than the
22 South Vietnamese believed in theirs. In having those strongly held beliefs, I mean that's
23 why they said, 'Well however long it takes, we're just going to keep after this.' I suppose
24 they could also read some of the handwriting on the wall of what was happening in the
25 States at that time with the anti war movement and while they weren't winning on the
26 ground in Vietnam they were certainly, you could probably say they were winning the
27 political battle in the United States.

28 RV: Do you think the United States military forces lacked that urgency? That
29 might be a simple question there's more to it. What was, in our minds, we obviously had
30 the firepower, we obviously had the ability, but in the field was there a sense of urgency
31 that you saw that we on our side did not have?

1 SD: Boy! (Laughter) I've never been asked that question before. I don't think
2 that, (speaks with someone else); my wife just came back in to grab something. Was
3 there a sense of urgency for us to win this war as a grunt on the ground?

4 RV: Or was there a lack of the sense around that? I've heard many veterans, not
5 necessarily the Vietnam War, just describe in wartime there is this underlying sense of
6 urgency even if it's a slow day and you're just hanging out and nothing is happening.
7 You still feel that and I'm wondering if that was the case on the ground there in Vietnam
8 for you, for what you saw, your personal experience?

9 SD: Well I guess the best way that I can answer that is go back to something I
10 said earlier in another one of the sessions. There was a frustration in the field oftentimes
11 that the rules were such that it made it more difficult to win. And it goes back to, 'How
12 much political clearance do I have to have in order to call in artillery on a position that
13 I'm receiving fire?' At least when I was in the field you know there was a sense that we
14 could have fought this a different way. And in a sense we were asked to fight this thing
15 with one hand tied behind our back. So you know thinking about this now I guess my
16 answer is I'm not sure there was an urgency by the leaders to win this thing. You know
17 what I'm saying?

18 RV: Yes I do. Absolutely. It's something that I have heard before.

19 SD: That this was more of a, 'We're going to put you guys in harm's way and see
20 how this comes out.' (Laughter)

21 RV: (Laughter) That's nice for you all.

22 SD: You know you fly out on all these missions and you get dropped into an LZ
23 zone, or you know a landing zone, we called them LZs. You kind of wonder sometimes
24 why you're here. I suppose it's because somebody spotted some enemy or whatever. It
25 just seems like a lot of time chasing your tail.

26 RV: That's an interesting way to put it. Let me ask you this, is this (laughter) it
27 provides a great visual as well or a sad visual, this feeling you had, especially about the
28 leadership, is this something that you developed in the field or in the rear when you were
29 back there kind of watching and listening and observing?

30 SD: Well there wasn't a lot of love for the leadership. I don't know if I told you
31 this story. We were out west of Chu Lai someplace and we had been humping around the

1 jungles and we heard that the colonel was, he had been flying around on his little LOH or
2 whatever or his helicopter. We were going to be staying on this one spot for the day so
3 we had to take down some trees. Clearing an LZ took a little while, especially if there
4 were a lot of trees. Basically what you did was wrapped a little plastic explosion around
5 the base of the tree, depending on how big the tree was, depending on how much plastic
6 explosive went around it, then you put a charge into it and blew the trunk of the tree in
7 half and hauled it off to the side so finally you had enough clearing where some
8 helicopters could land. Well, that was the case this day. The colonel was going to come
9 down and visit our company. Before the colonel would come down everybody had to
10 empty their weapons and the word around was if you were found with a loaded chamber,
11 you were going to be subject to court-martial.

12 RV: Wow. They were that worried.

13 SD: Yes.

14 RV: Now what kind of statement does that make to you all?

15 SD: I've forgotten about that until it just popped in my head a couple minutes ago.
16 Yeah, what it said was he was afraid of getting shot by his own men.

17 RV: I mean there's a total statement of a lack of trust here. I can only imagine
18 how that made you all feel.

19 SD: Well sure. We're out in the middle of nowhere. We have no idea, well I guess
20 we did, kind of knew what enemy was around. Here's a whole company of men that
21 basically have been told to stand down with their weapons out in the middle of the bush.

22 RV: What did you see in the rear towards this? What kind of attitude was there
23 amongst the leadership that you witnessed? I mean, you drove around these officers all
24 day.

25 SD: Well right, and actually the relationship between the guys in the rear, the
26 clerks and the gofers like me I mean was pretty good with the brass because we did work
27 with them all day. I actually worked more with the sergeants, the top sergeants more than
28 I worked with the majors and the colonels.

29 RV: Why? Just because they were more of your direct contact?

30 SD: They were my direct contact. There was a few times where the major wanted
31 to go up to some village, I don't know 20, 30 miles north of Chu Lai so you know loaded

1 up the jeep and I think I took one sergeant and a major, we all drew M-16s and I drew a
2 couple of grenades and that kind of thing and drove them up there and drove them back.
3 Most of the drivers, the guys that were gofers were guys that had been in grunt units. I
4 think the majors wanted, when we did take them off the base, wanted somebody at least
5 knew how to fire a weapon. I'm not saying anything negative about REMFs but a lot of
6 times guys come to Vietnam and get rear jobs from the very beginning to the end. I mean
7 never lock and load. So I think I'm off on a tangent here...

8 RV: That's fine.

9 SD: ...but the leadership in the rear had a pretty good relationship with its clerks
10 and drivers and what have you. Whereas in the field there was, by example I just said
11 with regard with the weapons stand down when the colonel shows up, yeah there wasn't
12 trust. We never were sure what those guys were thinking or doing. I don't know if that's
13 much different than any other war. Maybe the grunts in World War II and Korea felt like
14 they always knew what was ahead of them where ours was more of a guerilla warfare all
15 the time, at least where I was at. I think that the guys up on the DMZ had it maybe a little
16 differently.

17 RV: Steve do you want to break for today?

18 SD: What time is it?

19 RV: It's about 9, well your time, what is it? It's 9:25, 8:25.

20 SD: I'm good for about another time minutes.

21 RV: Let me ask you then a couple other just I guess specific questions about the
22 rear in general. Tell me about contact with home. Did it improve in the rear and how did
23 that happen?

24 SD: Contact with who?

25 RV: With home, with the United States.

26 SD: Oh with home.

27 RV: With family and friends.

28 SD: I probably wrote more letters when I was in the rear. I sensed that, and made
29 it a point to let my parents know that I was out of the field and no longer in, I don't think
30 I used these words but things were a lot easier, a lot less dangerous. When you go to
31 Vietnam, somewhere in the process you have to fill out this form that says that if you get

1 wounded, who do you want notified and do you want notification before, and I don't
2 remember exactly how this went, but did you want, if you were only injured slightly, did
3 you still want a notification going back to the States. I had filled out the form that I said
4 unless I was seriously injured I didn't want that notification going back. I ended up
5 writing a letter to my parents to tell them I had been wounded because I was afraid
6 maybe they would get notified by it anyway and that I was fine, I was recuperating and so
7 on and so forth. I knew that they were probably very worried at that point. So once I got
8 to the rear I really made it a point that I was out of the field and out of a lot of danger. I
9 think I wrote them back. I guess I had the opportunity to write them back more often. Did
10 I answer your question?

11 RV: You did, I guess what you said was you wrote more. You didn't really tell
12 them everything.

13 SD: No. There were opportunities that you could do a, like a radio/telephone
14 phone call home.

15 RV: The MARS calls.

16 SD: Yeah, right and I just never did that. I just felt like it would make me feel
17 worse that you know especially if you still had a month to go and you heard from home. I
18 didn't take my R&R; everybody gets an R&R in Vietnam, a week off that they can go
19 someplace. There are five or six places that you can go; Hawaii, Australia, Thailand, a
20 few other places and I waited as long as I could to go to R&R because I felt like if I went
21 then I had to come back to Vietnam and do another six months that would just seem
22 interminable after having a week off at some place where you could wear your civvies all
23 week.

24 RV: So you waited as long as possible?

25 SD: Yes. So I ended up going to Bangkok for a week after I had gotten a rear job.
26 I would see guys who would go on R&R when I was in the field. Then they would come
27 back from Hawaii or Bangkok and be back in the field again.

28 RV: You're saying that's just got to be just unbelievably hard.

29 SD: Just unbelievably difficult.

30 RV: Yes. We can talk about Bangkok next time. I want to ask you about that,
31 what you did.

1 SD: What I remember of it. (Laughter)

2 RV: Yeah what you remember. You were there a week but you remember about
3 20 hours maybe (laughing).

4 SD: Something like that.

5 RV: Well why don't we go ahead and break for today, Steve? We'll pick up
6 another time. Thanks a lot.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Stephen W. Dant
Conducted by Richard Burks Verrone, Ph.D.
May 18, 2005
Transcribed by Brooke Tomlin

1 RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone; I'm continuing my oral history interview with
2 Mr. Stephen Dant. Today is May 18, 2005. It's 8: 36 a.m. Central Standard Time. I'm
3 again in Lubbock and Steve, you're in Colorado Springs. Steve we were just talking for a
4 second there before we began the interview again about an incident that you did talk
5 about in your last session when you all had to unload your weapons when was it a colonel
6 who came to visit?

7 SD: I think it was a lieutenant colonel. Don't hold me to that, but I think so.

8 RV: Tell me a little bit more about that incident. You said you wanted to talk
9 about it.

10 SD: Well I just, kind of as a follow-up and it occurred to me after our last
11 conversation that you know the time that I was in the field...what occurred to me was,
12 with the exception of that one incident where I think it was a brigade commander, again
13 don't hold me to that, I'm not sure. The entire time I was in the field there was never
14 anybody on the ground with our troops that was higher rank than captain. The captains
15 were usually our company commanders. Then lieutenants were platoon leaders. But for
16 the most part in the Vietnam War, at least where I was, and I don't know about other
17 wars but the guys on the ground were officer corps, were captain and below.

18 RV: Right. What does that say to you about that? You really didn't see any other
19 officers except this one incident besides a captain.

20 SD: Well as I said and we talked about previously, the higher brass was obviously
21 somewhat afraid of getting shot by their own men. We had to unload weapons when that

1 one time when one came to the ground. There was resentment when we would know that
2 the brigade commanders or battalion commanders or whatever commanders would be
3 flying overhead in their helicopters and there were times that we knew we were getting
4 orders to move a certain direction because maybe they had seen something or whatever
5 up there. We were the grunts on the ground having to do all the hard work and these guys
6 were, at least from our perspective, were just kind of sitting up there in their nice,
7 comfortable helicopters and got to go back at night to a hooch. They just weren't
8 participating in the action.

9 RV: What did that do to you guys? Did you think that that was legit that you had
10 to unload the weapons? Did you think someone would have actually taken a shot at the
11 guy?

12 SD: I was surprised that we had to unload the weapons. It wouldn't have occurred
13 to me to take a shot at the guy but when I was told that, I was really surprised. I wasn't
14 happy, nobody was happy about having to unload weapons out in the, we were out in
15 some pretty heavy terrain and it was out in a jungle somewhere. In my mind maybe the
16 brass knew something we didn't know but I didn't think it was wise to be unloading
17 weapons out in the middle of the field.

18 RV: Did you all ever talk about taking a shot at the command chopper above you
19 or anything like that? Did you ever hear talk like that?

20 SD: No.

21 RV: So this, I want to say rumor, or what people have reported, or what I have
22 heard actually and it has been documented in history books is this thing about morale
23 starting to really decline in '69, '70, '71. Would you say that this is evidence of that?
24 That this is maybe part of that tide of declining morale of American troops on the ground
25 in Vietnam?

26 SD: Well if not the troops on the ground, certainly the officer corps. (Laughter)

27 RV: That's a good point Steve.

28 SD: If they are worried about getting shot by their own men then their morale
29 can't be too high.

30 RV: That's a very good point. (Laughter)

1 SD: You know morale; I don't know how morale can ever be very high in a
2 combat unit just because of what you're up against. I mean it's just a matter of keeping it
3 above ground, I guess.

4 RV: Right. I mean you're in a difficult circumstance, a very stressful.

5 SD: Right, with a lot of high stress and people have gotten hurt or the potential of
6 getting hurt or killed and you know so morale is a relative thing.

7 RV: Tell me when you got back in the rear, and we've talked about this a bit but I
8 want to know what you're specific duties as a driver was. I mean tell me did you have to
9 report to a jeep at a certain time? Were you on standby hanging out in an office?

10 SD: I had to report to the office. I had a jeep to take care of. I was responsible for
11 the low-end maintenance on the jeep, you know taking care of it, seeing if the oil was
12 changed. I didn't do the tune ups but I helped with that. I just had to make sure that it was
13 in good working order. I reported every morning for duty at brigade headquarters, at
14 198th Brigade Headquarters in Chu Lai, then my duties really varied throughout the day. I
15 would run a lot of errands that included picking up some kind of supplies. As simple as
16 picking up some kind of supplies from PX or I might be running some documents from
17 brigade headquarters over to battalion headquarters. I might be driving somebody from
18 officer corps there at brigade headquarters someplace around the base. Every once in a
19 while, not very often, maybe off the base where we would go down to...oh, I don't
20 remember what the fire bases that were still open, I want to say Gator or Bayonet, or one
21 of those. I might work with some of the RTOs and then back at the communications
22 center off and on, maybe taking some radio calls from out in the field. That's usually
23 when somebody was going on break or something. It was cake duty. I was proud to be a
24 REMF.

25 RV: (Laughter)

26 SD: That was something that we talked about earlier with, what did the guys say
27 when they found out I got my rear job. You know they instantaneously everybody in the
28 company was calling me a REMF. My retort to them was, yeah and proud to be one.

29 RV: So when you say low-end maintenance of the jeep, tell me what that means.

30 SD: Again like changing the oil, rotating tires.

31 RV: You personally had to do this?

1 SD: Yes, I remember doing that kind of stuff. But if the jeep needed a tune up or
2 something wrong with transmission then I took it over to the motor pool. Since I had to
3 have a vehicle I would swap one out and take one back until they had mine fixed. I
4 remember the number on my jeep; it was number 37. Just the low-end maintenance. I
5 don't know how else to describe it.

6 RV: This is a huge difference from being out on patrol in the bush.

7 SD: Oh sure. Number one, it's not nearly the physical work of humping a
8 rucksack around out in the 95-degree heat with 95% humidity. It was sleeping in a bed
9 every night. It was showers every day, hot meals every day. You know it was in a clean
10 uniform with shined boots. It was closest to being back to the world as you could be
11 while still being in Vietnam.

12 RV: Did you know the date you would leave Vietnam?

13 SD: Well originally I was...I had gotten here in February. I think I got there
14 February 9, or February 8 or something like that. So I figured I was scheduled to leave in
15 early February of 1971. But when I got my orders and you get them a few months in
16 advance, to go back to the States and I was going to come back to Ft. Hood, Texas. At
17 that time you got to make a decision as to whether you are going back to the States and
18 finish your active duty back in the States for the five months that you got left or there is
19 an option that if you want to extend your tour of duty in Vietnam for an extra couple of
20 months. If you came back to the States with less than five months of active duty they
21 released you for the remainder of your active duty and you could sign out of the Army.
22 Since I had this great rear job I decided to extend my tour an extra couple of months so
23 instead of leaving in February I left in April. It turns out that had I not extended, that they
24 turned a lot of guys loose so that they could be home for Christmas and I probably would
25 have been home for Christmas.

26 RV: Really? But of course you didn't know that at the time.

27 SD: I didn't know that at the time and had I known that I probably wouldn't have
28 extended my tour.

29 RV: Yeah. Well, before we talk about coming home and everything that happened
30 after Vietnam. Let me ask you just a couple of other general questions about Vietnam.
31 First of all Steve, what else is there to say about your duty in the rear? You've talked

1 about where you lived, you've talked about your duties, and I want to ask you about R&R
2 and I want to ask you about some other things. Are there any incidents, anything that
3 comes to mind when you today picture your duty that last part of duty in Vietnam in the
4 rear, what do you see? What's in your minds eye? You see jeep number 37?

5 SD: I see jeep number 37. I see driving all over Chu Lai. I see parties in my hooch
6 with sometimes the guys coming back from Charlie Company when they would be on
7 stand down. I see myself hanging out on the beach. I think we had one day off a week. I
8 think. I've forgotten. That would usually mean that you would head down to the beach.
9 South China Beach is a beautiful, white sand, nice place to just kind of hang out and
10 drink a beer, read a book or something. It's just you know counting the days. Everybody
11 had a short timer calendar going. You know, how many days do you got left. Well it's 30
12 days and a wake-up. (Laughter)

13 RV: (Laughter)

14 SD: 25 days and a wake-up. 14 days and a wake-up. The time just absolutely
15 crawled.

16 RV: Did you have a short-timer's calendar?

17 SD: Oh yeah, I think everybody did. I mean you're marking off the days. I mean
18 it's just a calendar that...you're putting X's through it. How much time do I have to go to
19 get back to the world where they can't shoot you and eat you?

20 RV: Is that what you would say?

21 SD: That was one of the phrases that was around. Just put up with this shit and get
22 back to the States. Used to say that a lot in the field. Don't mean nothing and get out of
23 here, get back to the States, they can't shoot you and eat you. Which hanging out with
24 some of the...when you saw some of the tribes out west you wondered if they would
25 shoot you and eat you.

26 RV: Tell me about that phrase don't mean a thing, or don't mean nothing.

27 SD: Don't mean nothing, God you heard that all the time. Somebody got hurt it
28 was a way of...or if somebody got killed or if somebody got a Dear John letter it was just
29 a way of everybody trying to say you know, you're alive and we're going to get through
30 this and it was a way to try to tell somebody...a whole mixed bag of things but look at
31 the big picture, I guess. This don't mean nothing.

1 RV: Of course that was a lie right?

2 SD: Yes, somewhat. You had to, particularly in the field; you had to get things
3 behind you quickly. You didn't have a lot of time to be thinking about things or letting
4 them really get to you for too long because you had to have your act together. It was a
5 way of also commiserating with whatever was going wrong with the guy you were
6 talking to or whatever.

7 RV: Steve, tell me...in the rear, did you have pets? Did you personally, or did you
8 see this?

9 SD: God. I guess there were some dogs around. I never had a pet. The only thing I
10 saw around my hooch was a bunch of lizards.

11 RV: (Laughter).

12 SD: And nobody wanted them for pets.

13 RV: Yeah the geckos you mean?

14 SD: I don't know what kind they were. They were about a foot long, ugly looking
15 creatures. You know I guess lizards and rats, that was about it.

16 RV: Tell me about the rats.

17 SD: The rats weren't as bad. Can you hang on one second?

18 RV: Yes definitely. Hold on Steve. Okay, go ahead. Repeat that please.

19 SD: I said that the rats were worse as I remember in the stand down areas when
20 you came out of the field.

21 RV: How so?

22 SD: Well it just seemed like there were more of them. I don't know if that's
23 because they didn't keep these places clean or humans weren't around all the time
24 because sometimes the stand down area would be, all the troops would be in the field so
25 it wouldn't be being used. I just remember waking up a couple of times when we were
26 back on stand down and hearing rats scratching around, moving around under the cots. I
27 hated those fucking bastards. (Laughter)

28 RV: (Laughter).

29 SD: You know you turn on the lights and you get them all out of there. Just give
30 you the willies. I really don't remember them being a problem in my hooch when I had a
31 rear job. These suckers were big.

1 RV: That's what I've heard.

2 SD: They were big as a small cat, some of them. Ones not like the little three or
3 four inch variety. I mean these guys, hell they probably take on one of my house cats
4 here. (Laughter)

5 RV: I didn't really talk to you about this too much, about your life in the field and
6 the rear, but could you made some comments about the wild animals you saw in
7 Vietnam?

8 SD: You know the scariest things I ever saw was one time I came through a
9 hedgerow, I was walking point, I think I was walking point. I don't remember. Anyway I
10 came through this hedgerow and standing in front of me about, oh I don't know, 30, 40
11 yards away is a water buffalo. He's looking at me and I'm looking at him and he is not
12 happy.

13 RV: Why is he not happy?

14 SD: I never saw a water buffalo that liked GIs; that liked American troops. These
15 little kids, these little Vietnamese kids who go out in the middle of the rice paddy with a
16 stick and beat the ever living crap out of this thing and they would just go wherever this
17 little kid wanted them to go. If you came out into the rice paddy I mean that water buffalo
18 was looking at you like he was coming after you. This thing was looking at me like he's
19 going to charge and I'm going, 'Oh shit, I don't have enough ammunition on me to take
20 this thing down.' The word always was if one of these things charged at you, don't shoot
21 it in the, don't even try to shoot it in the head, take its legs out. Put your weapon on
22 automatic fire and try to wipe out its legs. You're not going to stop it with an M-16. I
23 thought sure that this thing was going to come charging at me and I just slowly backed
24 through the hedgerow and told whoever was behind me we're going to go around.

25 RV: Why did the water buffalo have a problem with Americans? Was it that you
26 guys smelled differently?

27 SD: I think we smelled differently. My dad grew up on a farm. We had a family
28 farm in southern Indiana. I would kind of be the city kid coming down there every once
29 in a while and the farm kids always got along better with the animals than the city kids
30 did. I think there is just something that animals sense about you. I'm sure we smelled a

1 whole lot different than the...I know we smelled a whole lot different than the
2 Vietnamese villagers. This animal saw us as a threat and acted that way.

3 RV: I've heard this before, quite a few times. I've joked from time to time with
4 Veterans that the water buffalo must have been Communists. They really didn't like the
5 Americans.

6 SD: Must have been. They did not. The other incident that I ran into with animals,
7 when we first moved out of the Batangan Peninsula and we went west out into the jungle
8 and the first night we were out – I'd kind of forgotten about this. We set up a perimeter
9 and in the morning just before dawn we hear all this rustling in the trees and we thought
10 the NVA was on its way. So we open fire. We just tore into this line of trees. The next
11 thing you know you hear somebody yelling, 'Cease fire, cease fire.' It turns out it's a
12 whole bunch of monkeys up in the trees making all this rustling noise waking up in the
13 morning. (Laughter) I don't think we actually shot any monkeys because we were
14 shooting down towards the ground and they were all up in the trees but scared the hell out
15 of us. It was the first time that we had been in the jungle as opposed to down on the plain
16 in the rice paddies. We just didn't realize. So after that we got use to every morning these
17 monkeys were going to be overhead and doing their morning thing.

18 RV: Did you ever run into rock apes?

19 SD: No.

20 RV: Okay just wanted to ask. I've heard quite a few stories about the rock apes.

21 SD: What are rock apes?

22 RV: Monkeys or apes that were quite good at sneaking up on American troops,
23 just kind of families of them living out in the bush. Mainly in the Central Highlands area.

24 SD: No, the monkeys that we ran into were the smaller variety. They probably
25 stood maybe a foot in a half, two feet tall. I don't know if that's the same one but I never
26 had any sneak up to our perimeter and try to take any of our stuff, or something. They
27 kind of stayed up in the trees.

28 RV: What about snakes?

29 SD: A lot of snakes. One of the things about if you were humping out in the bush,
30 particularity up in the hills, you know sometimes the easiest way to get from one point to
31 another was to be in the stream. The stream wouldn't be that deep or you would walk the

1 edge of the stream but it provided a natural trail whereas otherwise you would have to,
2 and you would pretty much know it was pretty difficult to mine a stream whereas
3 walking on a trail, particularly if you're out in the jungle some place you know there
4 aren't many trails out there so it's probably mined. So I remember a few times humping
5 along a stream and just seeing a lot of snakes that would go swimming by you. They
6 would see you coming and they would head a different direction. I remember particularly
7 these, I don't know what they were called, but they were some kind of green snake that
8 looked, well just scared the shit out of everybody when you would see one of these
9 things. I never had one crawl up to me when I was in a foxhole or anything. I got bit by a
10 lot of different bugs. We had this game going out in the field where we would have a
11 'Bug of the Day' because every day, I mean literally every day you would find some kind
12 of insect or bug or rodent or something different that what you had seen, had never seen
13 before.

14 RV: Every day?

15 SD: Everyday. I would have something different crawling on me every single day.

16 RV: How would you guys play the game?

17 SD: I don't know. Somebody would have the first bug of the day.

18 RV: Would you come up with a name for it?

19 SD: No, it was another way to stay sane.

20 RV: Right. On that subject tell me about humor played a roll for you over there.

21 SD: Well I guess, I never really thought about it. I guess you had to have one or I
22 don't think you would make it. There were a lot of practical jokes played. Everybody
23 knew kind of where the line was with regard to practical jokes. I'm trying to think of one
24 and I can't. A lot of horsing around. I remember my platoon leader; Lieutenant Franko
25 somehow got a football out into the field.

26 RV: Oh really?

27 SD: So we had a little touch football game going out in the middle of nowhere,
28 like three guys really throwing the ball around. I mean just something that would break
29 the tension and take a little bit of the edge off. He was good at it; I was fortunate to have
30 him as my first platoon leader. He was good at that kind of stuff. He knew when it was
31 time to be serious. When we would go back on stand down that it was time to party. I

1 don't think he minded if guys, when they went back, were smoking a little pot in the rear
2 while they were drinking their beer, but he wouldn't see of it, he wouldn't put up with
3 that shit out in the field.

4 RV: Yeah you've already said that...

5 SD: Did I answer your question or did I kind of meander around there?

6 RV: No, you did a little bit of both probably but I get the gist of it that humor
7 played a huge role for you guys. You just needed it to cope on a day-to-day basis. Is there
8 any incidents that come to mind?

9 SD: Any what?

10 RV: Any incidents come to mind, humorous incidents?

11 SD: You know I don't know. We were always, you know during the day
12 sometimes you would be out at night on patrols and during the day...one of the ways that
13 relieved tensions was card games being played. I played a lot of poker out in the field.
14 Most of it was nickel and dime games, which you know, added up to a couple of bucks
15 here or there. If you had a pot with probably ten bucks in it, it was probably a big pot. I
16 think there were some guys that played for higher stakes than that. I think that that helped
17 take the edge off as well, pass the time.

18 RV: Okay. Steve what about, to really change the subject here, what about
19 running into or exposure to defoliants, as of course specifically Agent Orange? Anything
20 that you know of?

21 SD: I only ran into an area once where we were out on a patrol and it may have
22 been platoon or company strength and I do remember I was, pretty sure I was walking
23 point that day, and all of a sudden I came into this area where I thought it had, it smelled
24 like CS gas. It appeared to be all over. By that I mean it seemed like it was covering leafs
25 and branches and stuff. I remember the word going back to the LT said, 'We've run into
26 something here that maybe, we don't know what it is but this place has been gassed or CS
27 here or Agent Orange or something but we don't want to go in here.' So he called back to
28 the rear and they turned us around and we headed someplace else. So I only had one
29 instance. I don't know what we were walking into. I thought it smelled like CS but I'm
30 not sure. I knew I didn't want to walk in there.

1 RV: Tell me about what you think about the whole Agent Orange in Vietnam.
2 You don't have to comment on that obviously if you don't want to. I'm curious as to
3 what you think.

4 SD: You know I didn't, at the time, have a lot of thought about it one way or the
5 other. I just thought it was something else we were doing. I guess I still don't one way or
6 the other. If you're asking me if I think it was wrong, I don't think so. If you ask me if I
7 think it was right, I don't know. When you're at war you have to use the weapons that
8 will hopefully help you win the war. We're fighting a war in the midst of a jungle and the
9 Viet Cong and the NVA were hiding in the jungle so take away that asset.

10 RV: What do you think about all the claims and the stuff going on now by
11 veterans saying that they were exposed and it's caused this disease and this disease and
12 this problem? Do you have any opinion on that or any experience with that?

13 SD: I don't because I wasn't...if I was exposed to it, it was just that one time. I
14 don't know of anybody that had made those kind of claims and I wouldn't, you know, I
15 wouldn't judge anybody on what their experiences were in Vietnam because there were a
16 whole lot of guys that had much worse or much more traumatic experiences than I ever
17 had. I consider myself lucky. I think I got off easy. I think I had a relatively easy tour of
18 duty compared to a lot of other guys I've talked to.

19 RV: Tell me about the relationship of the guys in the unit. You've described a
20 little of this when you went back to the rear for duty there. How would you describe it in
21 general, the bond you all have?

22 SD: The bond was really tight when you're in the field and while I was still in
23 Vietnam. One of the things about the Vietnam War is you didn't go over as a unit; you
24 didn't come back as a unit.

25 RV: What do you think about that?

26 SD: Well looking back on it now I think it was stupid. It didn't forge that
27 community, that relationship before you went over there, which I think would have been
28 important and I think we're doing that today now. Units go over as units. Certainly that's
29 the way it was in World War II. I don't know about Korea. And on the flip side when you
30 got out, you ended up losing contact with the guys that you had been so close to, and so

1 there wasn't a...you individually had to decompress from the experience of Vietnam as
2 opposed to going through it as a group of people. You follow what I'm saying?

3 RV: Absolutely, yeah.

4 SD: I think we all learned a lot from that as a country, at least I hope we did.
5 Doing it that way doesn't contribute to a good morale situation either.

6 RV: How so?

7 SD: Again I think if you go over there as a unit and you're building that team
8 atmosphere, that fosters higher morale than you go over there and you're thrown in with a
9 bunch of people and they're all looking at you kind of like well, we'll give this guy a
10 month. (Laughter) You make it through the month and you're part of the deal. Whereas if
11 you go over as a group, I guess there's always going to be some of that I wonder if this
12 guy's going to make it. I don't think it would be to the same degree.

13 RV: How would you all treat the new arrivals?

14 SD: The FNGs?

15 RV: Yes, the FNGs.

16 SD: (Laughter) I was always treated pretty well. I think I told you this; I was
17 lucky I had a sergeant kind of take me under his wing and really help me through the first
18 few weeks that I was out there. I think most guys were that way with the exception of if
19 you really did get somebody who came out to the field that obviously was either as dumb
20 as a rock, and we did have a couple of those guys come out to the field, or had a real
21 attitude problem. You usually try to find a way to...if they are dumb as a rock, you try to
22 get them out of the field, get them back and get them a rear job.

23 RV: How do you do that?

24 SD: You tell the sergeant, you tell the lieutenant who tells the top sergeant back in
25 the rear. I think the top sergeant then you know, most of the top sergeants had been in
26 combat, they knew. If they had somebody that was just so stupid that they were going to
27 get people hurt that you had to get them out of there. So I assumed that the top sergeant
28 would find a way, some job back in the rear where this guy could go and spend his tour in
29 Vietnam burning shit you know or something.

30 RV: Well let me ask you this and I don't mean this to sound like a dumb question,
31 and no pun intended, how do you tell when someone's dumb? When they get to the field

1 how do you tell they are not, well dumb, as you said? They are dumb as a rock as you
2 said.

3 SD: I think that most people know. It's not just in Vietnam but it's anywhere. I
4 don't think it takes very long for people to size people up to determine that somebody
5 doesn't have, and it's not their fault, a very high IQ. That's what we're talking about
6 here. Where they have been through the training and they can do the rudimentary parts of
7 the job and this is not a sophisticated job, being a grunt. (Laughter) They're slow to the
8 take. It's, how long does it take you to set up that Goddamn claymore? They know how
9 to do it but they are just slow. I don't know how else to define it. There's no way that
10 they belong in the field.

11 RV: So you can just basically tell the sergeant?

12 SD: Say, 'Come on, look at this guy.' You yell at them a few times and you
13 realize that's not going to get anywhere. Everybody realizes that you got a problem here,
14 you got to deal with it. A lot of this just goes unsaid. After everybody figures out that this
15 guy's going to get himself hurt. He ain't going to cut it.

16 RV: Well I guess that's a problem. When you're talking about the safety of the
17 unit you got to take action in your own hands to do this. Did you ever see any
18 homosexuality in the field or in Vietnam in the rear or anything?

19 SD: Not in the field. I don't remember any in the rear. No, I guess not.

20 RV: Okay. Well could you tell me about your R&R experience, what you
21 remember of it?

22 SD: (Laughter)

23 RV: You said you went to Bangkok.

24 SD: Yeah I went to Bangkok, Thailand, me and actually it turned out, I was
25 working in brigade headquarters at the time, but I ended up going and hooking up with a
26 guy who was from my old company who was the company clerk at Charlie Company and
27 Bangkok was just a party town for GIs on R&R. It was sin city. It was a wonderful place
28 for a young, unmarried GI. It was cheap. I've forgotten what my hotel room cost for a
29 week but it was cheap. When you got there you got the lecture from the, before they
30 turned you loose, you got the lecture about VD and all the sexual diseases that you could
31 catch by screwing these whores without any condom on. You had to listen to that for 20

1 minutes and keep looking at your watch. Can I get the hell out of here so I can go party?
2 Then they turn you loose on the streets. Somehow everybody finds out that you go, you
3 go hire a driver, and I don't think it cost me more than 10 bucks a day if that much to hire
4 this guy who would drive me anywhere I wanted to go at whatever time of the day I
5 wanted to go. A very nice guy. We got to know each other pretty well by the end of the
6 week. You find out where the bath houses are and you go and pick up a nice, cute, good
7 looking Thai girl and you spend a few days with her, but actually the first couple of days
8 I mean I really don't remember very much. (Editor's note: Information removed at
9 narrator's request.) Then the last couple of days you start saying, 'Well I'm in Bangkok, I
10 guess I should go do a little sightseeing along with all this partying.' So we went over to
11 the big temple with all the gold Buddhas and by the palace and just did the normal tourist
12 stuff. I ended up hanging out a couple of nights with my driver and he took me over to his
13 pad and we partied over there for a while with a bunch of Thai guys, drinking Thai beer,
14 and smoking some kind of weird pot that I'm sure was laced with opium. Then it was
15 back to Vietnam where I think I had a couple more months to do then I was gone.

16 RV: Have you ever been back to Bangkok?

17 SD: No, I haven't.

18 RV: Would you like to go?

19 SD: Sure. I would love to go back and see the palace and I would like to go back
20 and see, I think there's a big temple. I'm not sure I would hang out in the same bars with
21 my wife that I hung out with the last time I was there. (Laughter) You know I think,
22 looking back, I think the Thai, Bangkok government did a good job of taking the GI's
23 money and showing them a good time and I understood that all of the prostitutes and all
24 of the bath houses had to go to like weekly checks or something to see if they had
25 contracted any kind of VD or something. (Editor's note: Information removed at
26 narrator's request.) It was a great party town. It was great to let your hair down and just
27 get away from it in a week. It really was, what I thought, was a beautiful city.

28 RV: Have you talked to your wife about all this stuff, about Vietnam, about
29 Bangkok?

30 SD: Oh yeah. She knows almost, I think I've told her over 30 years just about
31 everything that we've discussed here. I don't think that there's much that she doesn't, I

1 don't think that there's anything that she hasn't learned along the way. It just kind of, it
2 comes out...it seems like over 30 years it came out in spurts. A lot of it didn't come out
3 at all at first. It was like that time I told you that I found myself crawling under the bed
4 when I was joking about it, but really that kind of stuff kind of, more than anything else
5 scared the hell out of her when she first saw it.

6 RV: Did you ever go to USO shows? See anything like that?

7 SD: No.

8 RV: Okay.

9 SD: Most of the USO shows that I was aware of I was making sure that Da Nang
10 was secure.

11 RV: Right. Okay, Steve, could you make some comments about fear and what
12 you saw, witnessed, felt, anything?

13 SD: About what?

14 RV: Fear.

15 SD: Fear?

16 RV: Yes.

17 SD: Well I guess I don't know how to answer that other than you were always
18 afraid.

19 RV: Were you?

20 SD: Sure.

21 RV: Did you talk about it with the other guys or did y'all leave that alone?

22 SD: It was a given. The only difference I saw about how people were fearful and I
23 think I talked about this earlier, was there were the guys that dealt with fear that basically
24 said, 'Well if it's time for me to go then it's time for me to go. That's what the good Lord
25 willed,' or whatever. I never bought into that. I liked to believe that that what I did, what
26 we all did mattered and we were in control of our own destinies if we had our shit
27 together. That all relates to fear. I mean if you're not afraid then there is something wrong
28 with you.

29 RV: When were you most afraid, when would it happen the most? Do you
30 remember?

1 SD: Well, I was really afraid that water buffalo was going to charge. I really was.
2 There were a couple of times when I was...one time when we were coming in on a, we
3 were going into a landing zone and I think there were a bunch of helicopters so we must
4 have been company strength. We're landing in this big open field, high grasses, and we
5 must have been taking incoming. You can never hear if you're taking incoming or not
6 because the helicopters are so damn loud. For some reason, either the door gunner or
7 pilot or co-pilot was anxious to get us off the helicopter because I think that they thought
8 we were taking incoming. So if you're on a helicopter, I mean those things are big
9 targets. As much as you really don't want to get off them you would prefer to keep
10 flying, you really want to get off and get away from that huey as quickly as you can
11 because it is such a target. So this guy, the helicopter pilot, for whatever reason, I mean
12 we're still like three or four feet off the ground and I jumped out. I don't think he wanted
13 to sit down because he thought it was wet and it turned out he was right. So we jump off
14 of the helicopter. I dropped down about three feet and I find that I've sunk up to my
15 knees, or a little above my knees in mud so I've got a 65 pound rucksack on me and I'm
16 up to my knees and hips in mud and I can't move. As far as I know we're taking fire. So
17 you get pretty scared if you're stuck in the mud and there's a helicopter hovering above
18 you and you think that there's incoming and you can't move. That was a scary moment.

19 RV: What happened, how did you get out of it?

20 SD: I ended up slipping off my rucksack and getting unstuck from the mud. I was
21 able to walk at that point or you know, well you've been in mud. You know what it's like
22 to try to drag your feet out of that and try to walk. I slowly made my way up to the wood
23 line with everybody else. I still don't know to this day if we were taking fire or not, but I
24 guess he thought we were and somebody else thought that they were. It's just little things
25 like that, it doesn't seem like a big thing but at the time it seemed like a big thing.

26 RV: Yes, I can imagine. Could you make some comments about bravery? What
27 did you see?

28 SD: Well I told you I saw, I know that Jerry got a Silver Star. He got shot in the
29 stomach after his first dustoff went down, his second one, they got him back on that and
30 he's still firing his weapon after he's shot in the stomach over in the hillside. He probably
31 didn't have to do that. There's just a certain amount of bravery that goes with, in my

1 mind, all the guys that were there. The fact that they were there says something about
2 them. Although we all didn't have a choice but the fact that every single one of those
3 guys that were grunts in Vietnam, one way or another said, 'I'm going to allow myself to
4 be put in harm's way.' So I just look at a whole generation of guys that I thought were
5 very brave. If you're asking me if I ever saw anybody charge up a hill against machine
6 gun, no.

7 RV: Well yeah I was going to ask you any incidents, and if it's that fine, if it's not
8 then what did you see? Or did you not see some extraordinary heroic moment?

9 SD: The most heroic moment I ever saw really was when Jerry was wounded and
10 man he's still firing. That's why I say you know, I consider myself lucky because most of
11 the combat and action that I saw was not nearly as fierce as some of the other things that I
12 hear guys tell me about.

13 RV: Is that something that you hear talked about at reunions and things like that?

14 SD: Yes. I mean guys talk about where they were and what they did and do you
15 remember this. Some guys remember it a little differently than you do. You try to fit the
16 pieces together. So yeah, there's a lot of those kinds of conversations. You try to validate
17 what you did. I think I'm like most people, we spent a lot of years trying to forget this
18 stuff and then something comes back and then you're trying to remember it and it's
19 sometimes tough to remember everything that happened. It's a little fuzzy.

20 RV: Tell me Steve, one last question about in country, did you ever take part in
21 any kind of civic action, any kind of serious interaction with the civilians?

22 SD: Um...

23 RV: Excuse me, the Vietnamese civilians.

24 SD: We were in a lot of villages. We would be on patrol. We would come through
25 villages. There were certain villages that I thought that the people were pretty friendly
26 and were for us. There were other villages that we really had our doubts about. When I
27 was in the rear from time to time I would be in the village that was outside of Chu Lai
28 base dealing with those little merchants, buying little stuff. You know having little
29 conversations, but in terms of having an ongoing relationship, I mean the person that I
30 probably knew better than anybody else was the gal who was you know cleaning my
31 hooch when I had a rear, when I had a rear job. She would show me pictures of her

1 family and I would show her pictures of mine. I remember trying to explain to her what
2 snow was. (Laughter)

3 RV: (Laughter) How did you do it?

4 SD: Well I don't know, like shaved ice, you know. It's kind of hard to describe. In
5 pictures I had I had snow on the ground. But she was a very nice gal. All the gals were
6 that were working on the base I thought. I kind of felt sorry for them.

7 RV: Did you?

8 SD: Yes.

9 RV: Did you tell them that? Especially your hooch maid, did you try to talk to
10 them about how you felt?

11 SD: There were a number of accounts where girls in the rear would, and you were
12 warned against this, that they wanted to have a relationship with you. They wanted to be
13 your girlfriend because they wanted you to fall in love with them and marry them and
14 take them back to the States.

15 RV: How do you know this, did they tell you this or was this the deal, this was the
16 rumor? This is what you were warned about?

17 SD: Well I don't remember if I was warned about it or not but I knew that it
18 happened on a couple of occasions where guys fell in love with Vietnamese women and
19 it was, the Army made it very difficult for them to well A, if you got married I think you
20 were in trouble if you tried to take this girl over to the States. The red tape was
21 unbelievable. There was no question in my mind that a lot of those, I don't want to say a
22 lot, some of the people, South Vietnamese people that worked in the rear were trying to
23 find a way to get out of Vietnam and move to the States.

24 RV: Did you ever have any incidents like that yourself?

25 SD: No.

26 RV: What did you think the Vietnamese thought of the Americans?

27 SD: I think most of them thought we were very rich and by their standards we
28 were. I think that they probably thought that we were arrogant. Maybe we were. I'm
29 talking about; this is a reflection of when I had a rear job. I think that some of them
30 thought that we were nice guys and they thought that some of us were idiots, which was
31 also probably true.

1 RV: Right. I guess that's inevitable.

2 SD: Yeah, it's inevitable.

3 RV: Did you get a sense that they understood why the United States was there and
4 what you all were doing?

5 SD: I only remember having one little conversation. I remember a snippet of a
6 conversation of which my hooch maid made the comment somewhere along the line that
7 the Viet Cong were very bad people. Beyond that I don't remember having a lot of
8 conversations about why. It was just a given that we were there.

9 RV: Do you think that the civilians understood like the big picture or were they
10 more concerned based on what you saw, especially in the field, with their day-to-day
11 lives?

12 SD: I think that they knew if we left they were in deep shit. I really do.

13 RV: And what is deep shit to you?

14 SD: I mean that if we went away the NVA would be there in a couple of weeks.

15 RV: And what would happen? What do you think they thought would happen?

16 SD: I think that they feared for their lives. I think that's why so many of them
17 wanted to go to the States.

18 RV: Let's talk about the going to the States, let's talk about you coming home.
19 You got shorter, and shorter, and shorter, then you extended. Tell me your reasoning
20 behind extending. You explained that.

21 SD: I had a cake job in the rear that I didn't consider dangerous at all. I really
22 didn't want to go back to Texas and ride tanks around and play war games. I would have
23 thought that that was a bunch of bullshit. I really wanted to get on with my life. So I saw
24 an opportunity to start my life back as a civilian five months earlier than I would have if
25 I'd have come back to the States. That's why I extended an extra couple of months to stay
26 over there so I could get out of the Army in April instead of September.

27 RV: What were your plans after the Army? What did you have in mind? And
28 when you were still in Vietnam, what did you think? Where did you see your life going?

29 SD: Oh there was no question and I said this to myself probably a 100 times, if I
30 get through this, if I ever get out of this fucking place I'm going to get my act together

1 and I'm going to go back to school. I wasn't sure what I was going to do, but I was going
2 to be more successful at some...I was going to make a success out of my life.

3 RV: Did you not feel it was a success at the time?

4 SD: No.

5 RV: Was it based on your lack of...?

6 SD: I was not a good student. I was partying. I was horsing around, no direction. I
7 was a pretty immature individual.

8 RV: Is that Steve talking today or did Steve back then at age, what 22, 23 see
9 that?

10 SD: Well I saw myself as a much different person coming out of Vietnam than I
11 did going in or coming out of the Army than I did going in to the Army. People ask me,
12 'Was Vietnam a good experience?' They don't put it that way, but you know. In some
13 ways, you know I don't want to ever have to do it again, but it really, there's nothing like
14 getting shot at to, you know, kind of focus your life like a laser beam.

15 RV: Is that what did it?

16 SD: You know I think so because it put so many things in perspective. When I
17 came home and I went back to school, my grades were so crummy when I came out of
18 school that I went...my folks had moved to Delaware and I applied to the University of
19 Delaware. They wouldn't accept me as a full time student. So I had to go to school for a
20 year as a part-time student. I think I took six credits a semester and proved that I could...I
21 had to have a B average for 12 credits in order to get accepted as a full time student,
22 which I did. I think having the Vietnam experience you know helped make me a better
23 person.

24 RV: How did you become a better person? I mean you just talked about it but
25 what do you mean by that? Is this what your Vietnam experience means to you Steve?

26 SD: Well I think it gave me a new perspective. It gave me an appreciation for
27 what I had. If you see a third world country and see how those people are trying to make
28 a living and how many problems that they have to overcome compared to being a citizen
29 of the United States, I mean there's just no comparison. If you get yourself in the middle
30 of a few life or death situations you begin to appreciate life. And so you know that's why
31 I say I'm not fortunate to have that experience, but having that experience brings a unique

1 perspective that at least really helped me in getting my act together. I can just remember,
2 one of the things I do remember very well is being in a foxhole in drizzling rain and
3 muddy boots and wet and cold and thinking, 'If I ever get the hell out of here man, I am
4 going to make something out of my life.'

5 RV: Well looking back right now, today in May 2005, did you do it?

6 SD: Yes, I think I'm living the American dream, I really am.

7 RV: Really? You kept that promise to young Steve in that foxhole?

8 SD: I think so. There have been some bumps along the road. I have a wonderful
9 family and a great job and a nice house. I make a nice living. I didn't come from money
10 or anything but there's lots of opportunity out there.

11 RV: Right. Well before we go there can you describe coming home? How did that
12 happen? This is April '71?

13 SD: Yes, this is April '71 and again I was one of the lucky ones. I came out of the
14 field and got a rear job so I got to decompress a little bit from being in the field to being
15 in the rear and then coming home. I knew a lot of guys who came out of the field and two
16 weeks, three weeks later, they're home. That's really a different transition to make than
17 what I went through. Even so I mean, hang on one sec.

18 RV: Okay.

19 SD: Coming home was wonderful but it was different and at times difficult.
20 Landing in Ft. Lewis, doing that final wake-up in Vietnam and signing out of, I don't
21 even remember where we flew out of.

22 RV: Was it Chu Lai?

23 SD: No it wasn't Chu Lai, I had to fly down to, I think it was Cam Ranh Bay. I
24 had to fly down to Cam Ranh Bay then go through all the forms and bells and whistles
25 and get on a plane. When you got all those guys on a plane and it was wheels up, I mean
26 the cheer that went up was unbelievable. Then it was a long flight home, but I really
27 don't remember very much of it. I think I slept most of the way. I do remember we had
28 airplane problems and we had to stop in Japan.

29 RV: Oh really?

30 SD: Yeah, Jesus Christ. I survived all this and I'm going to drown in the fucking
31 ocean now.

1 RV: (Laughter)

2 SD: We had an engine go out or something so we had to land in Japan. We were
3 in Tokyo for like eight or nine hours while they repaired the plane. Then we took off
4 again and then we were up and running. Then we landed in Seattle and spent a couple of
5 days in Ft. Lewis, Washington, and had a couple great steak dinners and more than a few
6 beers. I remember seeing the guys who were about to go over and they would look at you
7 and want to come talk to you and I just...(laughter)

8 RV: (Laughter)

9 SD: I'm going no. There wasn't anything you could say to those guys; just you
10 know pay attention and keep your head down.

11 RV: Steve, do you remember your feeling on the plane? You described the cheer
12 but when you left, you got out of Vietnamese air space, how did you feel personally?

13 SD: I was elated. I was just thrilled. I couldn't believe it. I cheered I'm sure as
14 loud as everybody else when those wheels were up flying away from the coastline. I
15 remember that I think everybody was giving the flight attendants a hard time.

16 RV: I'm sure. I've heard that.

17 SD: But they were having a good time, too. My bet is that they hated dropping
18 guys off there and loved bringing guys back, and we were the guys that they got to bring
19 back.

20 RV: Okay so when you get into Seattle, nighttime or daytime?

21 SD: Boy, I don't remember.

22 RV: Do you remember getting off and getting onto American soil?

23 SD: I remember it was morning when we got to; it was early morning when we
24 got to Ft. Lewis, so we must've got there at the break of day or something. I remember
25 having at six o'clock in the morning or something a steak dinner in the chow hall, in the
26 mess hall at Ft. Lewis there. I thought well this is cool, steak dinner and beer at 7 o'clock
27 in the morning.

28 RV: Right, but it worked for you.

29 SD: But it worked just fine thank you.

30 RV: Did you notice changes about the United States, anything?

1 SD: Well not at that point. It was all Army on the plane ride and I don't remember
2 much of the airport in Seattle. Then I was quickly onto Ft. Lewis. So it was, as much as
3 anything, I think I loved the cool air. Then I was just in Ft. Lewis I think for two or three
4 days and you send over to a battalion or some kind of headquarters and sign a couple of
5 forms and there's a big book that you sign and that's where you sign out of active duty.
6 You have to sign this statement that you're actually on active duty for the next three days
7 so you're not allowed to go punch out any officers or anything you know. Then I caught a
8 bus to, or there was a bus ride back to Seattle airport and I caught a United Airlines flight
9 from Seattle to Chicago and then Chicago to Philadelphia. I remember I got on the plane
10 and the stewardess woke me up because the plane had landed. She goes something to the
11 effect of, she goes, 'You're unbelievable.' I said, 'What?' She goes, 'That was the worst
12 flight that I have ever been on.' I guess we bounced all over the sky. People were getting
13 sick everywhere.

14 RV: Oh really?

15 SD: Yes. I slept through the whole thing.

16 RV: Gosh, is that a statement on the sleep deprivation over there or you just were
17 exhausted?

18 SD: I think I was physically and mentally just drained. Then I caught the plane in
19 Chicago to Philadelphia and my folks lived down in Newark, Delaware, so then I was
20 going to get a cab from...I told them, 'Don't come pick me up.' I just wanted to show up
21 at home.

22 RV: Why?

23 SD: I don't know. I didn't want all the hubbub in the airport you know. So I got in
24 a cab at the airport to go over to 30th Street Station to catch a train to go down to
25 Wilmington. Actually, my sister was going to pick me up at the train station in
26 Wilmington but the cab guy, for some reason this sticks with me, you know I was in
27 uniform. He wanted to know where I had been. I said, 'I just came back from Vietnam.' I
28 guess he had a nephew or somebody that was over there. I get to 30th Street Station and
29 he said, 'Cab ride's on me.'

30 RV: Oh really?

31 SD: Yes, it was very cool.

1 RV: That kind of falls in line with my next question, and please continue to
2 comment on that if you would like, but what kind of reception did you receive in the
3 United States? That certainly is a positive thing right there.

4 SD: Yeah that was very positive. You know you did see that from guys who had
5 either been in the military or who had sons that were over there or nephews, whatever. It
6 was very strange. Nobody really wanted to talk about it. There was a lot of anti war stuff
7 going on. Certain people would look at you like you were from Mars. I think I
8 mentioned...

9 RV: What do you mean?

10 SD: You know there were stories going on about the atrocity's that were going on
11 over there. I got home just as Senator Kerry was doing his shtick about how we were all
12 barbarians. So people would look at you and go well, they would wonder.

13 RV: So do you mind if I ask about that? You did think that Kerry's testimony
14 before Congress did have a tangible effect upon your life right there in 1971?

15 SD: I think he was a contributing, no question in my mind he was a contributing
16 force to how Vietnamese, how soldiers who served in Vietnam got treated after Vietnam.
17 There is just no question in my mind. I mean you can have a lieutenant who is supposedly
18 served a tour of duty over in Vietnam who's testifying to the fact that he's seen all these
19 atrocities go on. At the same time the My Lai thing has come down so that doesn't help.
20 You know there pictures of that little girl who ended up with napalm on her, that doesn't
21 help. You know it helps...stories like him then lead to movies like *Platoon* and...what
22 was the one with Marlon Brando?

23 RV: *Apocalypse Now*.

24 SD: *Apocalypse Now*, which were ridiculous, stupid movies.

25 RV: Tell me why. Tell me about the Vietnam movies. I want to ask you about that
26 later but go ahead and comment on that if you would like. Did you see them? Do you try
27 to avoid them?

28 SD: I think the first one I saw was *Deer Hunter*, which is another stupid movie.
29 Yeah I would go see them and I would just come out and go...people would ask me and I
30 would go, 'No.' You know, the helicopter scenes look good. (Laughter) That's about it. I
31 just realized what time it is here.

- 1 RV: Yes. You want to go ahead and break and we'll continue next week?
- 2 SD: Yeah, I got a meeting downtown I got to get to.

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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Stephen W. Dant
Conducted by Richard Burks Verrone, Ph.D.
May 25, 2005
Transcribed by Brooke Tomlin

1 RV: This is Dr. Richard Verrone. I'm continuing my oral history interview for the
2 Vietnam Oral History Project with Mr. Steve Dant. Steve, why don't we continue? A
3 couple of things that we wanted to talk about that you said specifically that you wanted to
4 talk about since our last session was something that you remembered about being in the
5 rear and then also something about being in the field. Why don't we start with what you
6 remembered about being in the rear? Also, let me say that it's May 25, 2005 and it's
7 about 8:37 a.m. Central Standard Time. Steve, go ahead.

8 SD: There were two different types of guys that were serving in the rear. At least
9 from a grunt's perspective. There were the guys who had rear jobs who had been in the
10 field and there were guys who were REMFs who had rear jobs who had never been in the
11 field. There was, in my mind, a distinct difference between those two types of soldiers
12 who got jobs in the rear. What you tend to do when you got a rear job is you tended to
13 really hang out more with the guys who had been in the field as opposed to the guys who
14 showed up at Vietnam and for whatever reason whether they were, and nothing against
15 those guys, they were lucky or they ended up getting the right MOS, as opposed to the
16 guys who showed up in Vietnam and had a rear job and never went to the field. The
17 difference in serving in Vietnam between having a, and I may have said this before but
18 serving in Vietnam and having a job in the rear and having one in the field were just a
19 180 degrees different. Even if you had a rear job it was still an issue of you never got
20 enough sleep because well in my case I pulled a lot of guard duty at night or if you
21 were...a lot of the guys that were out in the field that ended at brigade or battalion

1 headquarters were radio/telephone operators, RTOs, which meant that they spent a lot of
2 time with communicating with troops in the field, which meant that they pulled all
3 nighters also. There were other...so the duty was still different than what you would have
4 had in the States, but the difference between the guys that served in the field and the guys
5 that served in the rear and I did both, were just very, very different.

6 RV: You've commented a lot on those difference and the attitudes of both. What
7 it sounds like is that there is some kind of mutual respect in general between the guys
8 who were in the field and went to the rear, who were in the field and I guess there is
9 maybe a lesser degree, and correct me if I am wrong, between those of you who were in
10 the field and then compared around those who were in the rear permanently.

11 SD: Well the guys who were in the rear they never really, and you wouldn't
12 expect them too just like nobody ever understands and there is no way you can fully
13 explain what it's like to be in a combat unit out in the field. Some of them, not all of them
14 I mean just didn't get it. So they were REMFs and they were REMFs. (Laughter)

15 RV: I hear you, that makes sense. Are you saying that the real REMFs, that was
16 their MOS versus the REMFs who were half field, half REMF?

17 SD: Guys like me who ended up getting, who after spending a certain amount of
18 time in the field and then lucked out and got a rear job somehow, I mean I thought were a
19 different class of REMF than the guys who had been there permanently.

20 RV: And you're saying that your type of REMF, you, when you were back there
21 you guys garnered different respect from those who were in the field permanently.

22 SD: I mean I think the guys who had been in the field tended to hang out with
23 guys who had been in the field as opposed to guys who were permanently back there.

24 RV: Well tell me about, you remembered something else about being in the field.

25 SD: Well I do remember when we had been in country, I had been in country for a
26 while and I don't know the exact date. If I were to guess, I would say it was in summer
27 sometime when we were told that there was a mission that was going into Laos and we
28 weren't going to be part of the troops that were going to go in but we were going to be on
29 standby reinforcement in case things did not go well we would reinforce the troops that
30 were in trouble or needed help or they needed further support or whatever. I remember
31 going on one of the longest helicopter rides I think, oh I'm sure it was, the longest

1 helicopter rides that I had ever taken. We were flying for it seemed like a long time out
2 west of Chu Lai. It may have been southwest of Chu Lai. It probably was near, I mean I
3 didn't have a map with me at the time, but got us to within a pretty quick chopper ride
4 into Laos. We were set up on a perimeter basically waiting and as I remember we were
5 there for a couple, three days waiting to see what happened with the troops that actually
6 had gone into Laos. We were all really very nervous and apprehensive I guess. We felt
7 like if we were going to go in there that means things were not going well and that we
8 were going to go in hot which didn't make anybody happy. So after a couple, three days
9 of just hanging around we ended up not going on and we ended up getting back on
10 choppers and I don't remember where we went from there. I remember everybody was
11 very relieved that we weren't going to have to support the troops that went in there. I do
12 remember they found a whole bunch of caches of weapons, supplies, and you know
13 bombed a bunch of bunkers. I remember reports at the time, also that they were bringing
14 some reports back from the States and I don't remember if was *Stars and Stripes* or
15 hearing it on Armed Forces Radio about arguments about what we were doing going into
16 Laos. There was some denial that we were there. (Laughter) From politicians.

17 RV: Right. Massive denial.

18 SD: Right, massive denial. I remember thinking, 'Well shit, if we weren't who
19 were those guys?'

20 RV: Right. Did you guys actively discuss this kind of stuff? Like my God why are
21 we going into Laos, or what's going on in Laos? We've heard this but...was this part of
22 your discussion?

23 SD: Well we knew why. We knew why we were going into Laos and I mean there
24 was no doubt in everybody's mind where the supplies were coming. They were coming
25 down those trails that were out of North Vietnam through Laos and farther south than us
26 was Cambodia. That's how the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese were being resupplied.
27 In some ways, from a...kind of a no-brainer.

28 RV: Right. Well, what do you think about that looking back at it? What do you
29 think about America being in Laos? Was that something that doesn't make sense to you?
30 If it was a no-brainer then, what do you think about now?

1 SD: I think it made sense. We were at war with those guys. That's how the Viet
2 Cong and the NVA were getting their supplies so anything we could do to hurt that
3 supply line to cut them off made it more difficult for them to launch any kind of ambush
4 or whatever against us. So I guess we understood why people in the States, some of them
5 would not be happy about this because obviously they would see this as an escalation of
6 the war. But if you're on the ground and you know that's how the Viet Cong or the NVA
7 are getting resupplied. I mean let's figure out a way to cut that off.

8 RV: Right. Okay what else?

9 SD: It somewhat goes back to what I was saying before that we...you know I
10 guess part of, although I probably didn't think about it at the time, the tactics of what we
11 were doing sometimes didn't make sense. This one didn't necessarily not make sense.
12 Well I guess that pretty much...there is just a lot of aspects of this war that you just got to
13 go around on circles on.

14 RV: Right. Do I hear you saying that at some point the United States needed to
15 get into Cambodia and Laos and cut the Ho Chi Minh trail and pack the sanctuaries...you
16 know 1970, '71 was too late or it was late and that was not good?

17 SD: I go back to what I think I said earlier. You either get in to win this thing or
18 get the hell out. Don't be screwing around. Just trying to hold on to positions or you
19 know, almost fight it on the enemies' terms.

20 RV: Why do you think the United States didn't do that? What do you think was
21 going on?

22 SD: Well I can answer that now. I couldn't have answered it there because I've
23 done some reading since then. If you go back and read what Johnson and McNamara and
24 then later Nixon were doing, especially Johnson and McNamara. I mean they were trying
25 as much as anything, fight hard enough to hold the enemy at bay but not so hard that
26 you...they thought that, well they thought there was some danger about bringing in China
27 into the war effort. I think they were really looking for some way to establish South
28 Vietnam as a separate country and not worrying about defeating North Vietnam. When
29 you're also lying to the people about how many troops you're planning on sending there,
30 you know you're somewhat lying to yourselves as well.

1 RV: Well Steve let's go back to when you came home and what was going on.
2 We had discussed a little bit of that. You talked about John Kerry and his testimony to
3 Congress and what you thought that was doing to kind of the mindset, morale of the
4 country. Before we get there I want to ask you about your personal transition to civilian
5 life and when you came home, what was that like?

6 SD: Well I'm not sure I know quite how to answer that. I think I told you there
7 were some good parts to it and there were some bad parts to it. The good part to it was it
8 that the guy in Philadelphia, the cab driver, who gave me a free ride from the airport over
9 to 30th Street Station. But you got home to...at least family were very happy to see you. I
10 think they had been sitting on pins and needles since I left and were glad that I was home.
11 So were close friends. It was strange in that you know that there were a lot of things that I
12 didn't want to talk about and at the same time there were you know your friends and
13 family you know didn't really want to talk about it either. So you were in many respects
14 you were out there in limbo. You know the Calley situation, with the massacre in My Lai
15 and all of that that had happened didn't help. What really didn't help was that instead of
16 My Lai being considered an exception, which I really think it was. I mean I'm not here to
17 say that all American troops were goody two shoes and nice guys. We were grunts and
18 we had to be tough and sometimes be tough with the Vietnamese people. I don't know of
19 another incident that even comes close to what happened in My Lai and yet you had a
20 Naval officer testifying in front of Congress that basically that was the norm. That's, in
21 my mind as I look back at this now, set up a 10 or 20 year period where people
22 considered that the norm and considered Vietnam soldiers or Vietnam Veterans to be
23 people that needed to be watched very carefully. I don't think that was fair. I don't think
24 it was deserving. I say that at the same time that you know I had some incidents when I
25 came home where you learn that when you're in combat to wake up in a hurry. When
26 somebody shakes your shoulder or somebody you know kicks your boot one of the things
27 that you learn to do man is to come instantly awake and try to become very aware of
28 where you are and what the situation is because you may be getting waken up by
29 incoming, or somebody's heard some rattle of bush or something. So for a long time I
30 would wake up with a start. My family had to be careful about how they woke me up in
31 the morning.

1 RV: Oh yeah?

2 SD: Yeah.

3 RV: What was that like? What do you mean? They literally had to be very
4 careful?

5 SD: I had one incident where my mom made the mistake of coming over and she
6 must have shook me on the shoulder or something and I came up with at start and out of
7 bed and I knocked her down. She kind of got upset by that and I had to tell her, 'Look,
8 yell at me from across the room. Throw something at me.' I don't remember exactly what
9 I told her, but I told her, 'I tend to have to wake up in a hurry. I'll get over this but don't
10 do that again.' So those kinds of things worry parents and loved ones and that kind of
11 thing. You slowly after a while get over that stuff.

12 RV: How much did you talk to your parents about what you had been through?

13 SD: Not much. Like I said everybody was very glad you were home. You know I
14 guess there was a sense of, 'We're sorry you had to go through this.' It was a very strange
15 time because of all the things that were happening politically at home as well as what was
16 being said about Vietnam soldiers. So it was like everybody wanted to get over this and
17 get this behind us. So there wasn't a lot of conversations about what had happened over
18 there. In my own case I've talked to my wife about this a lot off and on through you
19 know 30 years of knowing her. It's all sprinkled out over time. But she's probably one of,
20 the only one that I've had these conversations with up until recently.

21 RV: What made you change and want talk about it more recently?

22 SD: I think I said early on that 9/11 was like a flash point to me. I took it very
23 personally that somebody would attack our country. I thought right from the get go we
24 needed to take the offense because to play defense would be unacceptable. If you've ever
25 been in a war zone the last thing that you want is to be in another war zone or to have
26 your family have to deal with a war zone. That's just unacceptable. You got to take it to
27 the people who are attempting to take it to you. There is just no other way to do it or
28 you'll suffer the consequences and the consequences are unacceptable. I also took, not to
29 the degree that I took 9/11, but the Kuwait War was a very personal thing for me as well.
30 It was the first time since the Vietnam War that American troops were going to go back
31 on a very large...what's the word I'm searching for, on a very large basis go back into a

1 combat situation. I really felt for the guys who were, and I don't remember the exact day,
2 but the day that Schwarzkopf basically said, 'Let's go.' The mission was on. I mean I just
3 felt for those guys who were getting into helicopters and onto tanks and we're going into
4 harm's way.

5 RV: Did it bring back memories for you?

6 SD: Brought a lot of memories back. It was somewhat of a gratifying time as
7 well. I remember I was in Pittsburgh the day that Schwarzkopf, you know the troops were
8 launched. Pittsburgh on that day had decided at some time and I don't remember and I
9 remember walking down the street, I had just come out of a business meeting and they
10 decided they were going to ring all the church bells at some designated time. I was
11 walking down the street and I'm going, 'Holy shit this is wonderful. It's nice that we can
12 support our troops.'

13 RV: What about today when you see what's happening in the Middle East and
14 central Asia, troops coming back, what are your feelings about that?

15 SD: Well we had a...Colorado Springs is the home of Ft. Carson, which has a lot
16 of troops in and out of Iraq all the time. Last summer when I think 20,000 troops came
17 home, the town put on a big parade. This is a city of about, oh I don't know 450,000
18 people. They had 100,000 people lining the streets, which was very cool.

19 RV: Were you there?

20 SD: Oh yeah. I wouldn't have missed that for the world.

21 RV: Did you see yourself in those young men and women who were in the
22 parade?

23 SD: No, not really. Well I just wanted to make sure that those guys – well men
24 and women as the case would be here – that they got the support that they deserved or got
25 the thank you that they really deserve. I just didn't want them to come home and not be
26 welcomed home like the Vietnam Veterans weren't welcomed home.

27 RV: You've kind of touched on this but let me ask this straight up. Why was the
28 American public indifferent to you guys? And there are a lot of reasons; you've already
29 talked about a lot of the different things, but if you could answer that in a concise way,
30 because that question constantly comes up with students who study the war today, with

1 the public, with the media. I don't know if anybody really understands it from the
2 veteran's point of view and why that happened.

3 SD: You know I know you want me to be concise about it.

4 RV: I didn't mean it that way. I meant like...

5 SD: I think there's kind of a multiple answer to that.

6 RV: Yes.

7 SD: By the time '70, '71 came along there was a lot of anti-war fervent or
8 feelings in the country. That's part of it.

9 RV: Do you include Kerry in that basically? That kind of anti-war, America's
10 doing wrong kind of thing.

11 SD: No, Kerry is separate from that. There was I think also, there was an
12 embarrassment about the war because America felt as if, parts of America felt like we
13 were losing and this was the first war that America was going to lose and we were the
14 soldiers who were going to lose that war so that was part of it. I don't think anybody
15 would ever admit to that but it was an underlying feeling that Vietnam soldiers weren't as
16 good as other soldiers in past wars. Then you get to people like Kerry who contributed to
17 that directly. You know I almost puked when he got up and said, 'I'm reporting for duty,'
18 when he was nominated to be the Democratic candidate for President. (Laughter) You're
19 either stupid or ballsy; you're one or the other.

20 RV: (Laughter)

21 SD: The guy who defamed us worse than anybody else coming home was now
22 going to use his Vietnam record as the foundation to become President of the United
23 States.

24 RV: What did you think of the rest of the VVAW members, the Vietnam Veterans
25 Against the War?

26 SD: I really didn't understand where those guys were coming from. I thought they
27 were...it was one of the reasons that, and I come to find out that a lot of people felt the
28 same way. I'm going, 'Who are these guys; what are they talking about?' I didn't know
29 anybody like this when I was in Vietnam. I didn't hang around people...I didn't know
30 Vietnam Veterans when I was either at home or when I was going back to the University
31 of Delaware or when I went into a career. Vietnam Veterans were you know kind of like

1 me, guys who either got drafted or enlisted and did their duty and came home and tried to
2 get back into the American way of life. You know it was almost like a light bulb went off
3 when, it was the movie with Tom Cruise, where the guy ends up in the wheelchair and
4 ends up being very bitter, *Born on the Forth of July*?

5 RV: Yes.

6 SD: It turns out the guy was a fraud. (Laughter)

7 RV: You're talking about Ron Kovic?

8 SD: Yeah, I think that's the guy I'm talking about.

9 RV: Yeah he was the central character of that movie.

10 SD: Right. It turns out that he didn't have nearly the experiences that he was
11 claiming to have. So you know it was like Kerry and the people like him in that group
12 helped perpetuate a lot of myths about what happened in Vietnam and the Vietnam
13 soldiers, that it took us almost 20 years to get over and to get past and for people to begin
14 to say you know what, the things that Kerry and his folks were talking about weren't true.
15 It's another reason people didn't want to talk about what was going on because they
16 thought somehow you might have been a part of that.

17 RV: Did it affect you being in the war, when you came back, did it affect you like
18 getting jobs or in that kind of thing?

19 SD: No, at least I never saw that. I went back to college and that was in some
20 ways strange because every university had its anti-war groups and had some kinds of
21 demonstrations going on although most of that was over by the time I was back being a
22 full time student. I was a different student because I was a little older. I didn't really start
23 back to school until I was 22 and graduated when I was 25. Most of the student body is
24 18, 19, 20 year olds. So I wasn't doing the normal things that undergraduates do in
25 college. I was working in a men's clothing store and there were a couple of guys there
26 who were juniors and seniors and they were 20, 21 years old and they said, 'Why don't
27 you join our fraternity?' It was one of the nicer houses on campus. I said, 'Well it sounds
28 like you guys have a lot of fun,' and blah blah. He goes, 'The only thing you have to do is
29 you have to go through the initiation.' 'Well what's the initiation going to be like?' I
30 thought they try that shit on me somebody's going to get hurt. It was bullshit I wasn't
31 going to go through.

1 RV: What was it like being in college right after the war? You came back in '71
2 and how soon were you back in school?

3 SD: Well I got back in April of '71 and I started back part time school in that fall.
4 I was working just about full time in a men's clothing store. I had done some of that
5 when I was in high school and taking classes at night. After a year I started going full
6 time. It was just as I was starting back as a full time student moving into a new apartment
7 that I met my...

8 RV: I'm sorry Steve you cut out, say that again. You met your...

9 SD: I met my wife. And she was younger than I am. She was a couple of years
10 ahead of me. I guess she was starting her senior year and I was just half way through my
11 sophomore. She was a big help in getting me past a lot of these issues as well.

12 RV: How so? What did she do for you then?

13 SD: She's a good listener.

14 RV: She was interested in what you had been through.

15 SD: Yes.

16 RV: Was she one of the first ones to really take interest?

17 SD: I mean there were other people who took an interest but it was almost
18 a...kind of like looking at somebody from the sideshow at the circus interest. (Laughter)

19 RV: That's how you saw yourself? Or how you think she maybe saw you?

20 SD: I think that's how a lot of people you know they wanted to know what was
21 going on but they didn't really. Where she had some, I think, heartfelt interest. Part of it
22 was probably knowing who I was but she took a personal interest.

23 RV: Obviously that touched you; that meant something to you.

24 SD: Yes, no question.

25 RV: Well how much did you follow of what was happening in Southeast Asia,
26 you know when you came back and you were in school? There's still plenty of stuff
27 happening there.

28 SD: I was still following it a lot. You know I thought we should, I was never one
29 of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War marchers. I thought that those guys were all
30 weird, but at the same time I believed that if we can't win this thing then let's get the hell
31 out. I also felt like we got to be supporting the South Vietnamese as much as we could

1 and try to help them win the war but I also knew in the back of my mind that if we left,
2 they were toast.

3 RV: Yeah you have already talked about that. What did you think that we needed
4 to do or what would you have liked to have seen us do, the United States, after you left in
5 the early '70s?

6 SD: I don't know what else you could have done than what we did and that was to
7 try to negotiate our way out. It was too late to try to go back and try to win this thing the
8 right way. I read some place recently and I don't remember where it was but some
9 general was quoted that we lost this war the wrong way and his point was, and I guess I
10 agree with this, is that we never should have gotten past the advisory role in terms of
11 involvement in this war. This is hindsight and speaking 20-20, you know 20-20 hindsight
12 you know. It was the South Vietnamese people who were ultimately going to have to be
13 responsible for winning or losing this thing. If they weren't willing to fight and get their
14 act together both politically and militarily then you know, we would probably still be
15 there. If we were going to lose this thing, his point was, we should have lost it from an
16 advisory capacity as opposed to committing hundreds and thousands of troops into this
17 campaign because once we did that then the Vietnamese kind of went okay good, you
18 guys can do this for us. So I guess I didn't realize it at the time but that's kind of the way
19 I felt. Again if we aren't in there to win this thing, and I never felt like we were, then let's
20 get the hell out and let's try to find an honorable way to get the hell out of this thing.

21 RV: Yeah. What about the...you've commented on Vietnamization and kind of
22 how you did not think the South Vietnamese could pick up the ball and run with it. What
23 about, you know, when we kind of started withdrawing and got out permanently in '73
24 and then, you know, the Paris Peace is signed and Kissinger announces Peace with
25 Honor, did you see it that way or what were your thoughts then?

26 SD: No, I don't think anybody thought that we were going to have peace with
27 honor. (Laughing) I think we were kidding ourselves, you know, I think we lost the war
28 and the North Vietnamese won. And there's, you know, there is some honor in being a
29 good soldier, but there's no honor in defeat.

30 RV: What did you think about the Nixon and that administration and what
31 happened?

1 SD: I thought Nixon was an asshole. (Laughing)

2 RV: Yeah?

3 SD: I thought his, you know, I looked at him as kind of carrying on what Johnson
4 was already doing. You know, I think that he, and looking back, Nixon was probably a
5 little more honest about it than Johnson was in carrying out the war. But you know, at
6 the time, I didn't, you know, think that, you know, as a troop in the field or when I got
7 home that he was a very honorable guy, that he was a very good president. I guess he,
8 you know and then Watergate just confirmed a lot of things about, you know, he had
9 some personality traits that were...that did not lend himself very well to be a good leader.

10 RV: Yeah. What about Johnson, can you make some comments on him?

11 SD: Well, you know, again, there's some things that I did not know at the time,
12 but I mean, it's pretty obvious now why he decided, you know, not to run for reelection
13 for President because it was going to come out that he had misled the American people
14 about our involvement in the Vietnam War and the quagmire that he had gotten us into.
15 You know, there's no question that he did a lot of great things for civil rights in this
16 country, but I mean, in my mind, there's no question that he lied, up one side and down
17 the other about what his plans were, you know. In fact, actually what he was doing with
18 regard to attempting to step by step escalate the war in Vietnam.

19 RV: Right.

20 SD: And he and McNamara just lied their asses off.

21 RV: Why do you think they're doing that, just to make them not look so bad or
22 because they really believed that, you know, that this was...okay, this is a bit of a lie, but
23 you know, this is actually really going to happen for the United States or this is
24 happening for the United States. Maybe not that, you know, one thing or one incident
25 and you know, the Gulf of Tonkin or whatever it is that's coming out. Do you think
26 Johnson was genuine? You know, you said Nixon kind of no; he was not.

27 SD: Well I think Johnson, you know, looking back on it now, you know, I think
28 Johnson in some ways almost, he was so absorbed with what was going on domestically
29 with his Great Society Plan that you know, he didn't have his eye on the ball as to what
30 was going on with regard to Vietnam. And that's why I keep bringing up McNamara's
31 name because there was the guy who was leading Johnson along as to, you know, how

1 we should, how we can slowly escalate this thing and make the enemy come to the table
2 and we're going to scare the shit out of these guys and they'll see it our way. Well, that's
3 a fundamental misunderstanding of what is happening in Southeast Asia.

4 RV: An underestimation perhaps of the enemy?

5 SD: Absolutely. I mean, they didn't understand that in some respects, they were
6 getting into the middle of a civil war and that's kind of what we got into the middle of.

7 RV: Yeah, yeah. What about John Kennedy, what can you say about him?

8 SD: You know, I like a lot of what John Kennedy was saying at the time. You
9 know, I don't think he was alive long enough to form an opinion about what he was
10 going to do or not do in Vietnam. I mean he had advisors on the ground as far as I
11 remember. But at the point where Kennedy died, we were still an advisory capacity with
12 South Vietnamese Army and whoever was in charge of South Vietnam. If there was
13 a...the problem that Kennedy ran into was probably determining which corrupt
14 individual was going to be the, what was it, the president or premier or the leader of
15 South Vietnam, I forgot the title.

16 RV: Ngo Dinh Diem?

17 SD: Well yes, but I mean, you know, we were trying to determine which corrupt
18 individual was the better one to lead Vietnam.

19 RV: Right. You had people called Big Minh and then you had General Nguyen
20 Kanh.

21 SD: Right.

22 RV: Yeah, and then Thieu.

23 SD: Wasn't that Nguyen Kao Ky or something like that.

24 RV: Ky, yeah, and Thieu were the ones that kind of settled on for the remainder
25 of the thing.

26 SD: Right. You know, Kennedy wasn't around long enough to really kind of, I
27 mean, he was and he wasn't, but you would hope that he would've seen things a little
28 differently or more clearly than Johnson in terms of what we would get into in terms of
29 escalating this war. Although McNamara was his guy too, so maybe it would've gone
30 the same way.

1 RV: Well what did you think or how did you feel in April 1975 when Saigon fell
2 and the country fell?

3 SD: I guess I was very sad. I was not surprised, it was just, you know, a gloomy
4 day. I still have I think one or two old *Newsweek* magazines of about that time, you
5 know, that I kept all these years of the troops coming home and the pullout dates and I
6 don't remember what's on the front cover. I remember it has a big helmet on the front
7 cover, I don't remember what it says though, I should go dig that out. So I was following
8 it. You know, I guess I was resigned to what was going to happen. I mean, before
9 Saigon fell, I mean I just knew that was going to happen, I knew it was going to be a
10 mess.

11 RV: Yeah? When you left country you knew potentially?

12 SD: Yeah, yup.

13 RV: Hmm. How did that reflect upon you personally? Do you think, I mean, did
14 you feel it personally or was it more this is the United States?

15 SD: Well I guess some of both.

16 RV: Yeah.

17 SD: You know, as I look back on it now, I guess I still think it was a personal
18 loss to have put that much effort and time and have so many people get hurt and killed,
19 you know, and then to...the South Vietnamese have not done better under the North
20 Vietnamese conquerors. I mean, you know, how many people...you know, I've heard
21 estimates of hundreds of thousands of people I know went into those reeducation camps
22 and never came out. You know, look at how many refugees, you know, went on boats
23 trying to escape or went over to Thailand or Laos or Cambodia and lived in camps
24 because, you know, they'd rather take their chances with Khmer Rouge than with the
25 North Vietnamese, what does that say?

26 RV: Yeah.

27 SD: You know, this was a regime that was going to take over and they were
28 going to kick ass and take names and they did. So it was a...I mean, it was very much a
29 huge loss of life and in a lot of respect, that's embarrassing. You know, it's embarrassing
30 when, and I go back to Kerry again, but if we get out, a few thousand people will get
31 killed. Well, you obviously don't know what the fuck you're talking about.

1 RV: Yeah, yeah. Looking back Steve, what do you think about your service in
2 Vietnam personally, taking a look at the, you know, significance for you?

3 SD: Well, you know, I think I said that I'm, you know, I'm not sure I'd want to
4 do it again, but I'm glad I had the experience. And you know I'm proud of the service
5 that I had in Vietnam. You know, I wasn't a great soldier, but I think I was a pretty good
6 soldier. You know, I don't think anybody can fault, you know, and obviously this is
7 somewhat self serving, but the job that the grunts did on the job...the grunts did on the
8 ground in South Vietnam, you know, and I always wondered about that for years and
9 years and years after you hear all these stories about all these so-called atrocities and
10 what have you. But you come to realize again, those were the exceptions to the rules, to
11 the rule and you know, most of the guys that I met, you know, were kind of ordinary, you
12 know, come from middle America families who went over and thought they were doing
13 their duty.

14 RV: Is there anything that you would change about your experience if you could?

15 SD: Um, God, you know, that's a 'What if...' question.

16 RV: Yeah, I'm sure it is.

17 SD: You know, because, well, we never should've gotten ourselves into the
18 situation that we got ourselves into. You know I guess the question that goes by, the
19 question I get asked; 'If you had to do it all over again, you know, would you have gone
20 to Canada?' You know, and the answer is, it's a moot point.

21 RV: Yeah. It's what we call in the historian field, counterfactual history.

22 SD: Yeah, right, because of course in any place that you are in your life, if you
23 could go back and do redo something all over again, you might. But you know, then the
24 circumstances aren't the same because then you know something different than what you
25 knew then. I guess if I'd go back and change something, I'd go back and try to have a
26 conversation with President Johnson and Secretary of Defense, Mr. McNamara.

27 RV: What would you say to them?

28 SD: (Laughing)

29 RV: (Laughing)

30 SD: 'Be honest with yourselves,' you know, because I don't think that they were.

1 RV: What if they had said, ‘Well Steve, you just don’t understand it up here at
2 this level.’ (Laughing)

3 SD: (Laughing) Well, then you go back to the hindsight question, you know, and
4 then it becomes another moot point.

5 RV: Yeah, good answer. What do you think was the most significant thing that
6 you learned about Steve Dant in Vietnam?

7 SD: Um, I guess that I shouldn’t waste my life. Um, that there were, you know,
8 that I needed to get my act together.

9 RV: Would you say that...?

10 SD: But I guess I wasn’t running my life very well prior to that. (Laughing)

11 RV: (Laughing) Right. You mention that, do you think that you have been that,
12 do you think you succeeded?

13 SD: Oh yeah. You know, Vietnam woke me up, and you know, I became a, you
14 know, I don’t want to say better person, but a more focused person, better. You know, it
15 matured me, it got me to be more goal-oriented and make me realize that I could, you
16 know, after you go through a stint in the field, you realize a lot of the other things that
17 you were kind of blowing off or that’s not right, you know, it makes other things seem a
18 lot less difficult, you know.

19 RV: What do you think about Vietnam today?

20 SD: Well, you know, I guess I have mixed emotions about us reestablishing
21 relationships with Vietnam.

22 RV: Tell me about that, why?

23 SD: Well, you know, the resentful side of me says, ‘Don’t give those bastards
24 anything,’ you know, but I don’t think that’s realistic. And the other side of me says,
25 ‘Get over it.’ You know, that’s foolish, you know, we don’t try to reconcile our
26 differences. So, I’ll get over it.

27 RV: Yeah. Have you ever wanted to go back or do you plan to?

28 SD: No. You know, I’ve talked to some other guys who either have been or
29 planned to go back but I, you know...and I have one friend who kind of, you know, said
30 to me, ‘You know, what do you think about going back together?’ And I go, ‘No Dave, I

1 don't know, I really don't think I want to go do that.' I may change my mind, but right
2 now, I don't think so.

3 RV: Why not?

4 SD: I just don't want to go back and relive some of that stuff that close up.
5 Again, I may change my mind, but I don't think so.

6 RV: Okay. Well do you think Vietnam is still with the United States today or
7 have we been able to put it behind us?

8 SD: Oh, I think it's with us all the time.

9 RV: How so?

10 SD: I think it's with us somewhat of how we're dealing with the Iraq and Iran I
11 think particularly and hell, I'm in the business. I think that there is still a distrust of
12 American military and presidential power. And I think it shows through in how the war
13 gets reported. You know, I look at some press reports, you know, coming out of Iraq and
14 I ask myself of that reporter, 'Whose side are you on?' You know, and the answer comes
15 back, 'Well, we're trying to be neutral.' Well bullshit you know. In World War II, our
16 reports weren't neutral. I mean, they tried to get to the facts, but they were Americans
17 first. And I think that comes from that attitude of distrust, comes from the Vietnam War
18 and it goes back to Johnson and it goes back to McNamara and it goes back to Nixon,
19 you know, and those guys, you know. It goes back to, you know, when I'm sitting out
20 there and acting as reinforcing, standing by us, reinforcing troops that for guys who are
21 going into Laos and there was denial of what we were doing by the President back in the
22 United States. And I understand, you know, the military and the President had to protect
23 the troops at some point with regard to giving away the plans. I mean you know surprise
24 is an element that you want. You have to level with the American people over the long
25 haul. I think what Johnson did and what Nixon did created a distrust, and what the
26 military did created a distrust that lives on today. It's something that the press needs to
27 get over.

28 RV: Well you're in the media, right?

29 SD: Yes.

1 RV: So from your standpoint, from looking I guess from the inside out, do you
2 think that the press needs to get over that, move forward? What needs to be done
3 differently?

4 SD: I think that you have to come from this from a, I hate to use the word bias,
5 because it's overused these days.

6 RV: I'm sorry you cut out again; you said you hate to use the word bias?

7 SD: Because it's overused. Somebody's trying to beep in. You have to get over
8 Vietnam. I think you have to come up from a perspective of let's trust what the military is
9 telling us, let's trust what the President is telling us, let's trust what the Secretary of
10 Defense is telling us until we find out that they are not telling us the truth.

11 RV: So give them the benefit of the doubt first.

12 SD: Right, and we're not doing that as a press corps. What we're doing is we're
13 coming from the position of we don't trust you and until you go through all these
14 exercises then maybe we'll allow you to win back some credibility. I think that that's
15 detrimental to well number one the troops in the field. You know we're almost right back
16 to, and I don't care what anybody says, if you call the President a liar, if you call the
17 Secretary of Defense a liar, if you question their ethics, you got troops in the field, those
18 guys and those women hear that and the last thing that you want them to start thinking is
19 that their leaders have no credibility. It does hurt the troops in the field. That's why you
20 asked the question five or ten minutes ago, is Vietnam still thought about. I think it's
21 thought about in a whole lot of different areas. I certainly see it in the press corps.

22 RV: Do you think that's one of the lessons that the media needs to take or that the
23 country needs to take forward is don't forget that...let's move past this, in the media
24 specifically?

25 SD: I think the media needs to get over Vietnam. So many young reporters or
26 reporters today cut their teeth on Woodward and Bernstein with regard to *All the*
27 *President's Men* and then finding out that the Nixon Presidency was corrupt. Those are
28 our heroes. It's a gotcha game, and don't get me wrong, it's a reporter's duty. It's the
29 press' duty to hold the government accountable, to find out what's going on behind the
30 scenes and I'm not saying they should roll over for any government...

31 RV: I'm sorry you cut out again. Any government group?

1 SD: I said that they shouldn't roll over for any government or military group. On
2 the other hand there should be some respect for those institutions and I think that there, in
3 some ways, is a lack of respect. Again I think that's a carryover from Johnson and Nixon
4 and we're still living with those sins.

5 RV: That's very interesting. Well on that note, we've already talked a little bit
6 about this, but tell me about how Hollywood has portrayed Vietnam and your thoughts on
7 that.

8 SD: Well some of the same carryover. I mean I guess you can tell I'm not a fan of
9 Senator Kerry, but you know his testimony gives life to, you know My Lai, there were
10 lots of My Lais, there were lots of soldiers like Calley and so then you get Hollywood
11 right behind that. I mean the portrayals of most American Vietnam Veterans in the years
12 following the war were well look at the movies and look at how they are portrayed. They
13 are a bunch of nut cases or people with no conscience, ethics and not to say that there
14 weren't some terrible things that happened in war. There are always terrible things that
15 happen in war but the way the Vietnam Veteran got portrayed as opposed to any other
16 war; I mean even the *Rambo* stuff. (Laughter) You go from portraying the American
17 soldier as a nut case and barbaric as Kerry would say to then Rambo, who's a guy who's
18 kind of out of it but you feel sorry for him. Now we're starting to feel sorry for the
19 American soldier. There have probably only been a couple of movies that have somewhat
20 captured what happened in Vietnam.

21 RV: Can you give me any examples?

22 SD: Well probably the first half of...

23 RV: *Full Metal Jacket*?

24 SD: *Full Metal Jacket*, was a pretty true depiction of basic training. I thought that
25 once they got to the war part I mean I thought it was you know, sophomoric. There were
26 parts of *We Were Soldiers* that I could you know kind of see, parts of *Hamburger Hill*,
27 but beyond that I mean the rest of them were kind of...just, they had good helicopter
28 scenes. (Laughter)

29 RV: So that was pretty true to form?

30 SD: True to form, yeah.

1 RV: Do you think that movies like *Apocalypse Now* and maybe *Platoon*, parts of
2 *Platoon*, did that hurt the American Vietnam Veteran?

3 SD: I think so. Again you look at those movies and you go man that's why people
4 were reluctant to talk to you. Is that really what it was like? Is that what you're like?
5 There was more made in the press of, and there always is, I mean the press is going to go,
6 you know, it's a part of that, if it leads it bleeds. If it bleeds it leads. Some Vietnam
7 Veteran who goes off to reservation and kills somebody or his family or whatever you
8 know, that gets a lot of headlines. What doesn't get a lot of headlines is the guys who
9 came out, went back to school or went back to work and you know living an American
10 life.

11 RV: Do you think that's the majority of Vietnam Veterans?

12 SD: No question in my mind.

13 RV: Yeah. What about books on...I'm sorry go ahead Steve

14 SD: The overwhelming majority.

15 RV: What about books on Vietnam? You said you had done some reading.
16 Anything come to mind that struck you as being really valid, a worthwhile read? I hate to
17 put you on the spot for titles, you don't need to do that but you can make general
18 comments if you would like.

19 SD: Oh there was one I read a while ago and most of it focused on, and I can't
20 remember the name of it. Well I've read Burkett's book on...

21 RV: *Stolen Valor*?

22 SD: *Stolen Valor*. I read that a while ago. The most recent one I read was...which
23 one was it?

24 RV: Is it David Maraniss, *They Walked Into Sunlight*?

25 SD: No, McMaster.

26 RV: Yeah, H.R. McMaster.

27 SD: *Dereliction of Duty*.

28 RV: Yes.

29 SD: I thought that was a great read.

1 RV: Well in this same vein, what would you tell young people Steve about the
2 Vietnam War if you walked into a high school classroom or a college classroom? You
3 could say whatever you wanted to. What would you tell them?

4 SD: Boy I don't know how to say that without going back three hours' worth.
5 Well I guess you know, don't believe everything you read or hear. Probably half of what
6 you read or hear probably isn't true. I think American's hearts were basically in the right
7 place when we started down this road. I think we had some poor leadership along the
8 way. There are a lot of great stories that came out of Vietnam. It wasn't all negative. We
9 all need to get over it. That's not obviously easy. Easier said than done but I don't mean
10 forget about it when I say that. I mean that we need to...some of what I was saying
11 before, we need to learn from our experience but don't be caught in the trap of thinking
12 that just because we made a mistake that we should not be you know pushing forward to
13 our development as a country. You know a lot of people make mistakes in business or in
14 life or whatever it is and they want to crawl in a hole because they are afraid of making
15 another mistake. I think that in some respects the United States did that for a while. But
16 you know we're a great country and our hearts are in the right place and the worst thing
17 we can do is to crawl in a hole and go, 'Oh woe is me.' We owe ourselves more than that
18 and we owe, you know, the rest of the world more than that.

19 RV: Have you ever been to the Wall in Washington?

20 SD: Yes.

21 RV: Can you tell me about that experience or experiences?

22 SD: Well it was after 9/11, it was after I hooked up with a bunch of guys who I
23 had known in Vietnam. It was the first Americal reunion that I went to. It was the, I have
24 forgotten what year, anniversary of the Wall so it was like a big anniversary so there were
25 tons of people there. It was on Veterans' Day, I think. I guess I was like everybody else. I
26 was sad. I felt like, well to a certain extent, what a waste. I found a couple of guys who I
27 knew on the Wall. Cried like everybody else. It took me a long time to get there. I said
28 for years, and years, and years, people would go 'Are you going to the Wall?' 'No, not
29 going.'

30 RV: Why would you say that?

1 SD: Why would I want to go there? Well because I knew it would be an
2 emotional experience. As I said I spent years trying to put this all behind me and that was
3 just going to bring it back.

4 RV: So when you were there, did it?

5 SD: Oh sure. Like I said to a couple of guys in my unit, 'You know it's funny,
6 you spend 30 years or whatever trying to put all this stuff behind you and then something
7 happens and all of a sudden you're sitting around in one of the reunions and you're
8 showing pictures to each other and you're trying to remember.'

9 RV: Trying to remember.

10 SD: Trying to remember all these things, where was this and what day was this
11 and do you remember that? You know it's just 180 degrees. Thank you Osama Bin
12 Laden.

13 RV: And you say that sarcastically, obviously.

14 SD: Yeah. On this 9/11.

15 RV: Yeah. I mean the remembrance that you've gone through recently, and it
16 seems to me after talking to you for so long that it's been a cathartic thing for you, that's
17 it been a positive thing for you. I mean with obviously with bittersweet memories in some
18 cases. Am I wrong?

19 SD: Yeah somewhat. There is no question about that. You know the one thing
20 that, the one question that always got asked of me along the way, you know a lot of times
21 if you had to do it all over again question. My answer has always been...do I want to do
22 it all over again? No. But am I glad I went through it; am I glad I did this? Not
23 necessarily but on the other hand, I am glad I had the experience. It changed me as an
24 individual and there's a greater appreciation of I guess what you have that's very hard to
25 explain. It's you know kind of almost silly. Like sometimes marathon runners or people
26 who do a lot of exercise and I've done a lot of running in my life. Well why do you do
27 this? Well it feels so good when I stop.

28 RV: That's true. As a former marathoner I absolutely agree with you.

29 SD: (Laughter) Well I've never run a marathon but I've run a lot of 10 and 15 Ks.
30 So did I answer your question?

1 RV: Absolutely. Steve, is there anything else that you feel that we need to talk
2 about or cover that we have not?

3 SD: I can't think of anything at this point.

4 RV: Okay. Well we will go ahead and end the Oral History Interview with Steve
5 Dant for the Vietnam Archive Oral History Project. Thank you very much, Steve.

6 SD: Thank you.