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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with William Giles
Conducted by Laura M. Calkins, Ph.D.
June 30, 2005
Transcribed by Mindy Moser

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 Laura Calkins: This is Dr. Laura Calkins of the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech
2 University, initiating an oral history interview with U.S. Army veteran William Giles.
3 Today's date is the thirtieth of June 2005. I am on the campus of Texas Tech in the
4 Special Collections Building and Bill is speaking to me by telephone from San Francisco.
5 Good morning, Bill.

6 William Giles: Good morning.

7 LC: Bill, I'm very grateful to you for agreeing to participate in the Oral History
8 Project and I want to thank you for your time. And also, Bill, just so we have your
9 permission to make available this recording, this interview for researchers in the future,
10 do we have your permission to go ahead and do that?

11 WG: Yes.

12 LC: Okay, thanks Bill. I want to begin the interview by asking you where you
13 were born and when?

14 WG: I was born June 21st 1942 in Chicago, Illinois.

15 LC: Whereabouts in Chicago?

16 WG: The South Side.

17 LC: Okay. Tell me a little bit, if you can, Bill, about your family situation. What
18 about your mom? What was her name?

1 WG: My mom's name was Helvia. H-e-l-v-i-a. Giles. G-i-l-e-s. She graduated
2 from Illinois School of Technology with a degree in English and my father; William
3 Giles Sr. was born in Indiana. South Bend, Indiana. And he was a pharmacist. He got a
4 degree from Purdue University in pharmacy.

5 LC: Is that right?

6 WG: Uh huh.

7 LC: What year did he graduate?

8 WG: 1939.

9 LC: Couldn't have been a lot of African American guys in his class.

10 WG: No. (Laughs) No, no, no. I think there was one other person in his class.

11 LC: Is that right? Just talking about your dad for a second, if you don't mind, was
12 he a member of a fraternity or anything while he was there?

13 WG: Yes, he was.

14 LC: Which one?

15 WG: It's called Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity.

16 LC: Yes, sir.

17 WG: And he got his degree from Purdue University.

18 LC: It seems like education was important to both your mom and dad.

19 WG: Oh yes, very much.

20 LC: Did they get that from their own individual families?

21 WG: I believe so, yes. My grandmother was a nurse – my father's mother was a
22 nurse. My mother's parents were from the South, from Arkansas, and they were mostly
23 self – employed people and they weren't educated but they insisted that my mother
24 become educated.

25 LC: How many children did they have?

26 WG: Which ones, my mother and father?

27 LC: How many children did, for example, your mom's parents have?

28 WG: Oh, my mom's parents had, I think, about fourteen kids.

29 LC: Is that right?

30 WG: And my dad's parents had three.

31 LC: When did your mom's parents come up from Arkansas?

1 WG: They didn't. They stayed there.

2 LC: Oh, they did? Okay.

3 WG: And my mom came up to Chicago and met my dad in Chicago and that's

4 when they –

5 LC: Did she come up by herself?

6 WG: She came up with some church group.

7 LC: Is that right?

8 WG: Right.

9 LC: Huh. Do you know anything more about that, her trip? Did she ever tell you

10 about it?

11 WG: No, only that they met at the YMCA in Chicago and that's about all I know.

12 LC: Interesting. And did she ever work outside the home, your mom?

13 WG: Oh yes. She worked for the federal government in Social Security and she

14 retired...oh, I guess about twenty years ago. But she worked for the federal government

15 for all her career.

16 LC: Wow, with the Social Security Administration?

17 WG: Right.

18 LC: That's cool. What about your dad? Now, he took that pharmacy degree.

19 WG: Right. He worked mostly in hospital pharmacy. He had a stroke I guess

20 when he was in his late fifties and wasn't able to work after the stroke. And then I think

21 he died in the seventies.

22 LC: Did he like working in the hospitals?

23 WG: Oh yes. Oh yes.

24 LC: Do you know which hospitals he worked at?

25 WG: Ooo, I don't. (Laughs)

26 LC: Okay. It sounds like they were pretty education – oriented folks.

27 WG: Oh yes. We were all expected to go to college. We were all expected to

28 graduate from college and have a professional career.

29 LC: How many kids in your family, then?

30 WG: I have a brother and a sister. My brother's a year younger than I am and my

31 sister's two years younger than I am.

1 LC: So you're the oldest.

2 WG: I'm the oldest.

3 LC: So you had to kind of mark out the way.

4 WG: Right.

5 LC: (Laughs) Where did you go to school as a young person; elementary school
6 and so on, Bill.

7 WG: Elementary school was a Catholic school. It was – I forget the name of it. I
8 can't even...City of the Angels...something like that.

9 LC: Was this still in Chicago?

10 WG: Yes, this is in Chicago. And then when I went through high school, I went
11 to Saint Elizabeth's, another Catholic school. I went to St. Elizabeth's High School in
12 Chicago and then I went to University of Illinois School of Pharmacy and I got my
13 pharmacy degree in 1971 after I had left Vietnam.

14 LC: Bill, let me ask you about high school for a second. First of all, what year did
15 you graduate?

16 WG: 1960.

17 LC: 1960?

18 WG: Mmm hmm.

19 LC: Okay. And were you much of a sportsman in high school?

20 WG: Oh, I played a little basketball, a little football, but nothing...you know, I
21 wasn't focused on athletics. I was more focused on getting good grades.

22 LC: What subjects were the most interesting to you?

23 WG: Oh, anything scientific. Chemistry, math, let's see, biology...all those types
24 of subjects.

25 LC: Did you have to work at it, Bill, or did it come pretty easily, or somewhere in
26 between?

27 WG: It came pretty easily.

28 LC: Really?

29 WG: Yes.

30 LC: Lucky dog. (Laughs)

31 WG: (Laughs)

1 LC: So, would you consider – well, did the other kids kind of consider you a brain
2 box?
3 WG: Right.
4 LC: Yeah?
5 WG: I would help them with their homework and stuff like that.
6 LC: No kidding.
7 WG: Yeah.
8 LC: (Laughs) You were the go-to guy in the sciences. Were there many African –
9 Americans in the Catholic school system?
10 WG: At that time, those little two schools I mentioned were all black. Well,
11 mostly. The majority were black.
12 LC: Oh, okay. And what was the relationship of the kids with the powers that be;
13 with, say, the nuns?
14 WG: We were very respectful. I mean, in those days, you rose when then came
15 into the classroom, you rose when they left the classroom; you kept quiet. It was really –
16 something that I would like to see more of today is more respect for the teachers and
17 elders.
18 LC: And so you think that that kind of well-disciplined and ordered environment
19 was probably a good one?
20 WG: Yes, I do.
21 LC: Was it a good one for you?
22 WG: Yes, it was, yes.
23 LC: Did you read much outside of the sciences?
24 WG: Hmm. I don't recall – oh yes, well, I fell in love with Shakespeare at some
25 point in time and I read all of his works. His plays and so yeah, Shakespeare, yes I did.
26 LC: Did you find him on your own or was it part of a class?
27 WG: On my own.
28 LC: No kidding.
29 WG: Yeah.
30 LC: So did you like the plays or the sonnets or – ?
31 WG: The plays; the tragedies, mostly.

1 LC: Do you have a favorite?
2 WG: Well...(laughs) Romeo and Juliet. Well, all of us like Romeo and Juliet.
3 Othello...King Lear...all of them.
4 LC: Yeah, it's tough, isn't it? Are you much of a theater go – er or were you
5 ever?
6 WG: Oh, I was. I would go to the theater a lot. I would go to plays, concerts. I
7 love classical music. I studied piano when I was about six and a half years old until I was
8 a teenager and then I fought that war with the piano. All of my friends were playing but I
9 was doing these crappy exercises. (Sings tune)
10 LC: (Laughs) Right. Did you branch out or did you just decide to leave it?
11 WG: I just left it for a while.
12 LC: Okay. Did you ever come back to it?
13 WG: I tried to but it's less...what parents would try to get me to do now is get
14 back some of the things I did before.
15 LC: Exactly, yeah.
16 WG: Before Vietnam.
17 LC: Yeah. Music might be one of those.
18 WG: Oh yes. It's the love of my life.
19 LC: Oh yeah. Is it really?
20 WG: Yeah.
21 LC: Cool. Where do your tastes go now in music?
22 WG: I guess it would have to be the Classics, the plays. I've seen Les
23 Miserables about two or three times now and plays like that and musicals...things like
24 that, yes.
25 LC: Sure. When you graduated from high school, Bill, if you can think back to
26 that time, what did you see before you? Were you intent on getting to university?
27 WG: Oh yes. Oh yes. I was intent on getting into university. I was accepted into
28 Loras College. I was one of two African Americans that was admitted to the schools at
29 Loras College at the time.
30 LC: Which college?
31 WG: L-o-r-a-s. Loras.

1 LC: And where's that?

2 WG: It's in Dubuque, Iowa. (Laughs)

3 LC: What made you choose them?

4 WG: My mother (Laughs) had something to do with that.

5 LC: (Laughs) Okay.

6 WG: She wanted to go to – she didn't want me to go to a black college. She
7 wanted me to go to a Catholic college, which I did.

8 LC: Why was that? Why didn't she want you to go to, for example, a historically
9 black college or even one of the big public colleges in Illinois?

10 WG: She seemed to be the type of person that wanted to do something different
11 all the time. Like, whenever we moved, we moved into a white neighborhood.

12 LC: Really?

13 WG: And we got a lot of grief about that but she would always try to integrate us
14 into other cultures and other groups than just the black folks living in Chicago.

15 LC: That's interesting. Can you say anything about the grief that you guys got
16 when...?

17 WG: Oh, people calling you names when you walk down the street and cussing at
18 you and stuff like that.

19 LC: Yeah, that's pretty tough. How did you guys react? Did you parents tell you
20 want to do when stuff like that happened?

21 WG: No, I just reacted on my own. Mostly I would shout something back at
22 them. (Laughs)

23 LC: (Laughs)

24 WG: I might be outnumbered twenty to one but basically, they seemed to be
25 afraid of direct confrontation. As long as they were within shouting distance, they were
26 all right.

27 LC: (Laughs) So they would keep a safe distance away.

28 WG: Right.

29 LC: What about your brother and sister? Did they take it a little bit harder than
30 you since they were younger?

1 WG: I was more like a protector of them at that time. I was a big brother and
2 whenever anything would happen, I would intervene and in fact there was one time
3 somebody bad was getting ready to beat up my brother. I ran and hit them. (Laughs)

4 LC: You hit him?

5 WG: I hit him on the run and I just took my brother's hand and we walked
6 through the crowd and everybody just – like the Red Sea – parted. (Laughs) We walked
7 through everybody.

8 LC: Really, all white people in the crowd?

9 WG: Yeah. Right.

10 LC: Anybody step forward to say anything helpful?

11 WG: No.

12 LC: Wow. That's really scary. About how old were you? Any idea?

13 WG: Ooo. Let's see.

14 LC: Or how old was he?

15 WG: I'm looking at eighth grade maybe. He was in seventh grade; I was in
16 eighth grade.

17 LC: I'm sure he was glad you were there.

18 WG: Right.

19 LC: I bet he was. So tell me about going out to Iowa, to college.

20 WG: It was another cultural experience. I mean, what do you call it? Culture
21 shock.

22 LC: I'll bet.

23 WG: (Laughs) There were all these kids from the farms around in Iowa and they
24 seemed to have preconceived notions about black people and when I went there, I
25 destroyed them all. They would study, say for their exams, and I would maybe just sit
26 around and lollygag and when the exam was over they would always wonder, 'What
27 grade did you get? What grade did you get?' And then A or B and then they'd go, 'Aw,
28 man, how'd you it?' (Laughs)

29 LC: And what did you...did you just kind of say nothing or how did you handle
30 that?

1 WG: I just sort of said nothing, let them, you know, learn on their own that all
2 people are not the same.

3 LC: You just had it going on. (Laughs)

4 WG: Right.

5 LC: In the sciences, anyways, for sure. Did you make friends?

6 WG: Yes. In fact, I picked up a friend; I think his name was Richard. He invited
7 me one summer to visit his family in Fondulac, Wisconsin. We spent a week there and it
8 was very – his family was very gracious and there was no, there was just acceptance all
9 around and it was really a good experience to be exposed to their family and to see that
10 all people are not hateful and stuff.

11 LC: That's very good. And that was up in Fondulac?

12 WG: Right. Fondulac, Wisconsin.

13 LC: Did you have any – was there any negative stuff that came at you from
14 outside the family? I mean, when you guys would go shopping or maybe out to a
15 restaurant or something?

16 WG: No, no, it was just pretty much...I guess it's pretty much a laid-back city.
17 There was no big thing at all for me to walk down there.

18 LC: Wow. That's cool. Was it good to be, in a way, out of Chicago?

19 WG: Oh yes. I was away from – well, see my experience in Chicago was all
20 blacks because we grew up in a black – my friends were black. And so went I went
21 Wisconsin, or when I went to...yeah, when I went to Wisconsin, it was this eye-opener
22 that all people were just the same. It was possible to get along with everybody and not be
23 worried about it.

24 LC: Yeah, it sounds like; too, you got some respect, you know, from unexpected
25 quarters, at least at college. What about the professors? How did – was there anyone
26 there was particularly inspiring or good in the classroom?

27 WG: Not that I can recall. They were pretty much the same. It was only when I
28 went to – in fact, the irony of all this – when I went to professional school at University
29 of Illinois, that's when I ran into some professors that were really condescending.

30 LC: Really?

31 WG: Yeah.

1 LC: Well, I'll ask you about that in a sec. Did you actually take a degree then,
2 from Loras College?

3 WG: No, I dropped out about two years in and I went to school in Chicago.

4 LC: Which was?

5 WG: Oh, boy. I think it was...Dulasell? Dulasell College and I got a degree
6 there and then I applied to pharmacy school and was accepted there.

7 LC: So what year did you get your first degree then? Do you...?

8 WG: The first degree was in 19...I would say 64. Yeah, '64.

9 LC: And you applied immediately on then to Illinois?

10 WG: Yes.

11 LC: How many – well, first of all, tell me about deciding to go into pharmacy.
12 Your father had done that.

13 WG: Yes, my father had done that and looking back on it, I was probably trying
14 to please the family and that's why I – because I was always expected to a professional –
15 in the medical profession.

16 LC: In the medical profession specifically?

17 WG: Yeah.

18 LC: Wow. That's pretty heavy.

19 WG: Yeah.

20 LC: Was it something that you felt on your own, though, was calling you?

21 WG: Looking back on it, you know, because I've been in therapy for the last six
22 or seven years.

23 LC: Yes, sir.

24 WG: I realize it was not my choice. (Laughs) I would have much rather done
25 something else, maybe. But I felt an obligation to carry the family's name, you know?

26 LC: Oh, absolutely. And were they glad to have to back in state?

27 WG: Oh yes.

28 LC: Were your younger brother and sister going to college then, too, along this
29 time?

30 WG: Yes, my bother and sister were going to college. My brother got a degree in
31 computer designs. He's a computer whiz.

1 LC: Wow. (Laughs) Wow.

2 WG: My sister, she became a schoolteacher in Chicago. She got a degree in
3 education. I guess primary education or something like that.

4 LC: Did she continue teaching for a career?

5 WG: Yes, she did. She just retired last year.

6 LC: Oh, no kidding. Wow. I bet she could tell some stories, too. (Laughs)

7 WG: Oh yes, oh yes.

8 LC: Well, let me ask you a little bit about the University of Illinois. What was the
9 climate like when you got there?

10 WG: It was – you know, all the stuff was going on with the Black Panthers and
11 the revolution was going to start and all this so there was a little bit a tense period of time
12 when all these anarchists, whatever, the Black Panthers, the Black Movement, all this
13 was affecting a lot of what was going on. The murders in Mississippi, all that affected
14 what was going on.

15 LC: Were you – did you pay a lot of attention to that or was it on the periphery?

16 WG: I paid a lot of attention to the Black Panther movement, saying that they
17 want kill all the bourgeois black because we were culturally similar to white who were
18 against the black cause and stuff like that. I was concerned about that plus I was
19 concerned about if there was a revolution, whose side would I be on? (Laughs)

20 LC: I mean, that's confusing stuff.

21 WG: Right.

22 LC: And were you grappling with that in your own way?

23 WG: Right, right.

24 LC: Wow. Did you ever go to any meetings or kind of...?

25 WG: I went to one meeting and that was a Black Panther meeting and they were
26 talking about bashing white kids heads against the wall and killing them and stuff and I
27 started laughing and I had to stop laughing because one of their – two of their security
28 guards came and stood next to me. I got out of there as soon as possible.

29 LC: That kind of straightened you up.

30 WG: Right.

31 LC: And you head for the doors.

1 WG: Right. I said, ‘You people are crazy.’

2 LC: How many people were at a meeting like that?

3 WG: I guess there were about forty or fifty in the room.

4 LC: Was it kind of – your reaction was to laugh, which is interesting. Was it

5 scary on some level?

6 WG: It was scary when I realized it wasn’t a joke. I mean, they were really

7 serious about some of this crazy stuff. All I could do was laugh because it was just so

8 idiotic and then I was reminded that I was in a hostile parameter and that I’d better keep

9 my mouth shut until I got out of there.

10 LC: There was not much attractive in their rhetoric or in the their ideas for you?

11 WG: No, nothing at all.

12 LC: What about the Black Muslims, the Black Muslim movement?

13 WG: They weren’t attractive to me at all either because, like I said, they were –

14 we did do some of the things they were talking about and then they were talking about

15 killing people and stuff and then I just didn’t...just didn’t go along with any of that.

16 LC: You weren’t wired that way at all.

17 WG: No.

18 LC: Did you get involved in any political or social or fraternity groups and stuff at

19 Illinois?

20 WG: I joined the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. Was because my dad was in it.

21 (Laughs)

22 LC: Did that make him proud?

23 WG: Oh yes.

24 LC: I bet it did, actually. (Laughs) What do you remember? What can you tell

25 me about the chapter that you were in and the guys that you knew then?

26 WG: They were very intelligent. The academic requirements were very high so

27 they were – and they were all going to be professional people. Lawyers, doctors...we

28 had a lot of fun. The black side of Chicago at that time was pretty close to there because

29 – especially if you were a professional because there were about that many professionals

30 around at that time.

31 LC: That’s right, yeah.

1 WG: So it was pretty much – everybody knew each other and they knew the
2 families and everything like that so it was sort of close – knit.

3 LC: So some of those guys, at least by family or by reputation, you already had
4 some idea of who they were?

5 WG: Right, right.

6 LC: Wow. And what did the APA guys do for – kind of, for fun? Did you guys –

7 WG: We partied. (Laughs)

8 LC: You partied?

9 WG: Right.

10 LC: Were there sororities on campus, too?

11 WG: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. We partied with the AKAs and Deltas. We knew both
12 of those sororities. And like you said, the black community was pretty close – knit as a
13 group because we knew, because of family ties, reputation is not personal.

14 LC: Sure. In some ways, it's interesting that there was this sorority and fraternity
15 groups that were sort of very focused on academics and on achievement and on getting
16 good positions and so on when they graduated. And then there was this sort of radical
17 group – several radical groups that you've described. Was there any interaction between
18 them?

19 WG: No.

20 LC: Really?

21 WG: No.

22 LC: Let me ask how it happened, Bill, that you came to leave Illinois before you
23 graduated and go into the service. Did you get draft papers?

24 WG: I got draft papers. I was drafted.

25 LC: And this is while you were fully attending university?

26 WG: Yes.

27 LC: And so of course, you know I'm going to ask, why did you not receive a
28 deferment?

29 WG: Well, at that time, I think that there was not that many deferments going
30 around. They didn't offer me the deferment.

31 LC: It never arose as a possibility.

1 WG: No. Not for me, anyway.

2 LC: Did you report then to the draft board?

3 WG: No. (Laughs)

4 LC: What happened?

5 WG: It was '66 when I got my first draft notice. I moved to New York City.

6 LC: I see.

7 WG: In '67, they called me in New York City and sent me another notice. I
8 moved back to Chicago. (Laughs) And then in '60...that's when they sent the FBI after
9 me and that's when I reported to the draft board.

10 LC: How did you know that the FBI had gotten involved?

11 WG: They sent me a letter, a registered letter and I came home that day and my
12 mother and my sister were in the front room and they had this look on their face and I
13 said, 'Okay, give me my draft notices.'

14 LC: You already knew, huh?

15 WG: Yeah.

16 LC: Gosh. Let me ask about what your thinking was. I think this will be
17 interesting to students in the future. When you got the draft notice, what did you know?
18 I mean, the first time, before you moved to New York, what did you know about
19 Vietnam? What did you think about it?

20 WG: I knew that there was a lot of people going over there and there was a lot of
21 people dying over there and I...the protest – the war protest was just beginning to
22 get...and like I say, I used to love to go to musicals and in Chicago they had a lot of
23 things in coffee shops where people would sing folk music and read poetry. Pretty much
24 for people against war. I hung around those kind of people and that's why I realized that
25 I was more in their way of thinking than anybody else's way of thinking so I...that's
26 what I exposed myself to and that's really why I thought Vietnam was morally wrong.

27 LC: And you thought that at that point?

28 WG: Yes I did.

29 LC: Did you – were there particular coffee shops or places that you would hang
30 out where this kind of stuff was in the air?

1 WG: Yes. And I can't think of the names but it was a lot of pubs around Chicago
2 at the time.

3 LC: Were they on the south side, any of them?

4 WG: They were...mostly they were where what is called Midtown. There were a
5 lot of clubs, the blues clubs, folk music club, all kind of clubs in that area. I can't even
6 think of the area's name now.

7 LC: That's okay. That's okay.

8 WG: But it was sort of like a block above; a different club from that area.

9 LC: Tell me about going to New York. How did you decide on New York?

10 WG: What I wanted...I'd been in Chicago and I thought New York would be a
11 nice place to go so I went. I caught a bus up there. I think it was on a Greyhound. Yes.
12 And I stayed at a YMCA for a while and I – again, I didn't want to be friends with
13 anybody. I was just trying to you know, hide out or just...but I did make some friends.
14 And again, we went to the clubs, the folk music and the jazz and the blues clubs in New
15 York and it was another culture shock because New York was much faster than Chicago.
16 I mean, you walk faster, the subways are more crowded and it was just an experience
17 that I enjoyed.

18 LC: Did you make friends out there?

19 WG: Oh yes, I did. I had core friends. A lot of people, I knew their parents
20 worked for the United Nations so they were French, Africans, Nigerians, Dutch. It was a
21 whole slew of different types of friends from different countries were getting ideas and
22 we would get into these philosophical discussions that would last all night and part of the
23 morning. I was really getting to know different cultures and different ways of thinking
24 than...and that's what I enjoyed about being in New York.

25 LC: That must have been – you know, in some ways, although you're on the lam,
26 basically, you know, so a little dangerous, but you sound like you had a very good
27 opportunity to learn a lot things during that period. Were you reading a lot, too, Bill?

28 WG: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

29 LC: What kinds of things, do you remember?

30 WG: Oh...

31 LC: Literature?

1 WG: Literature, yes. Mostly literature.

2 LC: If you can remember, Bill, what was the talk about the Vietnam War among
3 that group of people? What were they saying about American policy?

4 WG: We should get out, it was a silent country and it was a civil war, it wasn't –
5 we shouldn't be involved in a civil war.

6 LC: And did all that sound pretty much right to you?

7 WG: Yes.

8 LC: Once you had moved back to Chicago and your mom had basically handed
9 over that letter, did you – how did you decide what to do next? How did you decide to go
10 to the draft board, essentially?

11 WG: I just gave up. I just said, 'Oh well.' And I still had the idea of finishing
12 college and getting a degree and I thought that would be compromised if I was arrested or
13 didn't go by the rules so I just said, 'To heck it with it.' I just gave up and went to the
14 draft board.

15 LC: And is that why, for example, you didn't try to leave the country?

16 WG: Right.

17 LC: Did you ever consider it?

18 WG: Yes. Briefly, yes. But I'm close to my mother and I didn't want to leave
19 her.

20 LC: This must have been tough for her, too.

21 WG: Oh, yes.

22 LC: Throughout.

23 WG: Very much. On one of the Christmases, well, the Christmas I was in
24 Vietnam, she was at work and she broke down and started crying and nobody could
25 control her and she was just so uncontrollable that they almost had to hospitalize her
26 because I was in Vietnam.

27 LC: And I'm sure that incident was just kind of the culmination of a whole lot of
28 stress and anxiety before that. Many, many, many months, I'm sure.

29 WG: Right.

30 LC: Had your brother received a draft notice?

31 WG: No.

1 LC: Did he ever get drafted?

2 WG: He did something – well, when he was about fifteen years old, he joined the
3 Air Force. He lied about his age and joined the Air Force. And he was such a mess up
4 that they finally found out old he was; they'd kick him out so nobody in the service
5 wanted him. My bother was diagnosed in his late teens with paranoid schizophrenia so
6 that probably explains a lot of what went on with him at that time.

7 LC: So he essentially was not going to be able to serve.

8 WG: Right.

9 LC: Yeah. Once you had to report, can you tell me what happened?

10 WG: We walked in we were – oh, we walked in and they had a physical – a so-
11 called physical. It wasn't a physical. They just looked at you. (Laughs) 'Okay, next.'

12 LC: Really.

13 WG: Right. It wasn't...they checked your blood pressure and your heart. But
14 even then, you know, it was, 'next.' They put us on a bus and they took us to the training
15 station at Ft. Hamilton for our basic training.

16 LC: How did you get down there?

17 WG: I'm sure it was on a train.

18 LC: Do you remember very much about your basic training?

19 WG: Yes.

20 LC: Can you tell me what it was like to be there?

21 WG: It was cold. It was in Kentucky. It was October, it was cold, it was
22 beginning of wintertime and they were always yelling at you and rushing you from one
23 place to another so you didn't have time to think. And I remember one thing about – the
24 one thing I remember about basic training was when I was – on Sundays they left us
25 alone and Sundays, I would go to the library and play some opera or classical music and
26 read a book at the library. And I'd be walking on this road and this car came by me with
27 one flag on the car, with one star on it. And I kept on walking and then this car stopped
28 and a general jumps out of the car and says, 'Whenever you see a car go by like that,
29 you're supposed to salute.' I went, 'Aw, man, it's on Sunday.' (Laughs) I wanted to go
30 and relax and this fool is yelling at me about saluting the damn car. So that's – so I
31 wasn't very cooperative in basic training. It got to the point where they left me alone

1 because what I was also doing when I went to the library was reading the code of military
2 justices and figuring out how much I could get away with before they court-martialed me.
3 (Laughs)

4 LC: You were?

5 WG: Yeah. (Laughs)

6 LC: Yeah, I think you were not the typical recruit. (Laughs) Not their typical
7 draftee. And your idea was to figure out how much it would take for them to – I mean,
8 what you would be able to do short of getting into some serious, serious trouble?

9 WG: Right.

10 LC: Wow. What was the routine like? I mean, they were hurrying to you around.

11 WG: During the morning, four o'clock in the morning, they would get you up and
12 we would go on a five mile hike or something like that and then we would go to the rifle
13 range and we'd learn how to fire weapons and then we'd have bayonet training and 'the
14 spirit of the bayonet is to kill.' I never would say that and they'd get pissed off at me
15 because I wouldn't say that.

16 LC: You refused?

17 WG: I refused to say the spirit of the bayonet is to kill. And we would be
18 marching along and they were just singing these marching songs. You know, 'Left, right,
19 left.' And I wouldn't sing those songs because, 'If I die in a combat zone, box me up and
20 ship me home.' I never would say that.

21 LC: So were you just quiet? Did you just kind of, you know –

22 WG: Mouthed it.

23 LC: Okay.

24 WG: But they would always mess with me so they knew I wasn't really saying it.

25 LC: I wondered if you made up alternative words or that kind of thing.

26 WG: Oh, no.

27 LC: But you were doing what you could to kind of be noncompliant?

28 WG: Right, right.

29 LC: Wow. How did you do on the rifle range and the shooting and all that?

30 WG: Oh, expert. I was expert. I was very good. But it didn't occur to me – I
31 said, 'What am I so proud of? They'll probably put me in infantry now.' (Laughs)

1 LC: Yeah, yeah. Well, did you have any say as time went on, as to what your
2 specialty would be?

3 WG: No.

4 LC: How did it happen that you went to...?

5 WG: I have no idea how they picked these guys for – I think it was some kind of
6 – we had a test when we went in and I think it might be some type of personality
7 questions on those test.

8 LC: Probably.

9 WG: And they probably pick them from that but I'm not sure about it. But most
10 of the medics that I knew were like people that were caretakers and that's I guess the way
11 they chose us.

12 LC: Were you – well, what was your response or your reaction when you found
13 out that you were actually going to go to Ft. Sam for medical training?

14 WG: Well, I knew that was the next step to going to Vietnam and I thought it
15 would be that that's where I was headed for. But the training was really limited to what I
16 experienced when I got to Vietnam.

17 LC: So it was related and useful?

18 WG: No.

19 LC: Not at all?

20 WG: Not at all.

21 LC: Wow. Tell me about that. This is about Ft. Sam.

22 WG: Well, what I remember about Ft. Sam was how to carry the wounded on
23 your back and how to make a hospital bed. You know, all this stuff. And there was
24 nothing taught there that I could use in Vietnam.

25 LC: What were they actually training you to do? I mean, within the Army's
26 mind, what was your job going be?

27 WG: My job was to take care of the wounded. They had a triage – the Army's
28 triage is the more severely wounded you don't treat because they'll probably die anyway.
29 You treat the walking wounded first because they could get their weapons and go back
30 out and fight. And then the moderately wounded, you would treat. But when we got to

1 Vietnam, it was reverse. I mean, just human nature made that you treated the people that
2 were the most severely hurt and the walking wounded were treated last.

3 LC: So that seems kind of pointless, then, in some ways. Did they give you any
4 kind of skills that you could actually use?

5 WG: No. You know, we gave injections, we learned how to give injections, we
6 learned how to make a hospital bed, but – oh, we learned how to tie a tourniquet and we
7 learned the protocol to dress wounds. We learned how to throw that up.

8 LC: How to what?

9 WG: We set into a cast. You would get this suction; you move the suction of the
10 lungs because the lungs have collapsed. So what we were supposed to do was take a
11 cellophane paper and put it over the wound to keep the air from escaping. That never
12 worked. (Laughs)

13 LC: That never worked.

14 WG: No.

15 LC: But the idea was to be able to preserve respiration and allow the wounded
16 person to continue to breathe.

17 WG: Right.

18 LC: And that didn't work very well.

19 WG: No.

20 LC: Was Ft. Sam a tough place?

21 WG: Not really. It was not as tough as I thought, you know, like infantry had to
22 be. We had pretty much, you know, we marched around and took these classes; mostly
23 how to give injections, how to improve certain things like that. But it wasn't as intense
24 as I thought it could have been.

25 LC: Were you, once you graduated from Ft. Sam, were you trained then as a
26 hospital orderly or as a corpsman, or what was your MOS described as?

27 WG: My MOS was 'medic.'

28 LC: Okay.

29 WG: And it was – medic could be a hospital corpsman, medic could be out in the
30 fields.

1 LC: So you were thinking that it was possible that you would be out on
2 maneuvers with troops?
3 WG: Right.
4 LC: Okay. And what did they train you for that was specific to that kind of work,
5 if anything? I mean, did they –
6 WG: I don't mean, like how to carry a wounded person, for example, we had a
7 fireman's carry where you carried them over your back while you drag them down. They
8 put their arms around you and you drag them as corpsmen. It was on those things that
9 they tested us.
10 LC: Did they teach you about, for example, how to do pain medications and stuff
11 like that?
12 WG: Oh, no, that was – only when we got to Vietnam did we learn about the
13 morphine injections that they did.
14 LC: Really?
15 WG: And those injections you could just go right through their clothing and inject
16 morphine. But they took it away from us while we were in Vietnam because a lot of men
17 (Laughs) you could go up and get high with it. (Laughs)
18 LC: Is that right? I was going to ask about that. Well, tell me first, before we get
19 there, about going out to Vietnam. Did you get to go home first?
20 WG: Yes. I think it was a week. I'm not sure. Of course, time just is sort of
21 destroyed in a way now.
22 LC: Oh yeah, I'm sure. I mean that had to be hard, though.
23 WG: Yeah. I was there a week and then I caught a plane to – they convinced me
24 to go to Oakland and I got a plane in Oakland and we flew out to Vietnam.
25 LC: Do you remember arriving?
26 WG: Yes.
27 LC: Can you tell me anything about it?
28 WG: I was scared shitless.
29 LC: Really.

1 WG: Absolute fear started kicking in. I figured that when we landed there would
2 be a common area, would be aiming their gun right at me, nobody else but me (Laughs)
3 and blow me away the moment I stepped off the plane.

4 LC: Wow. I'm sure you weren't alone in thinking that.

5 WG: Right, right.

6 LC: Getting off the plane and when nobody did shoot you, did you sense any kind
7 of relief or was it all just pretty frightening?

8 WG: It was all pretty frightening because like a lot of the veterans, when we start
9 landing in Vietnam, it's a beautiful country. It's green and lush forests and stuff and
10 sometimes you don't believe there's a war going on down there until you land and then
11 you see military vehicles. Everybody has a rifle but they hadn't issued me a gun yet so
12 I'm standing there wondering when I'm going to get a gun. (Laughs)

13 LC: Yeah. (Laughs) 'Go ahead and that over any time.' I can well imagine.
14 Well, did you arrive at Tan Son Nhut? I'm just assuming that you did.

15 WG: I believe so, yes.

16 LC: Okay, so down by Saigon.

17 WG: Right, right.

18 LC: And did you get picked up by somebody? Did you already know where you
19 were on your way to?

20 WG: No, we had to report to an office and they would tell you where you were
21 going to go. They would look up your records and tell you where you're going to go.
22 And then they would call whoever was transportation from that area and they'd come
23 pick you up and just drive you down there.

24 LC: Is that what happened with you?

25 WG: Yeah. So about the third day, I got my assignment and then they came and
26 picked me up in a Jeep and we were going on Highway 1 up from Saigon to Cu Chi. And
27 I still don't have a weapon there. Everybody's armed and they're telling me all these
28 damn war stories, you know, and I'm – finally I get to the point of where I said, 'I'm not
29 listening to any more of their war stories,' because if they duck, I want to duck. If they
30 run, I want to run. I knew they were probably ready and I wasn't.

1 LC: Yeah. You were just going to watch what they did. Did anything else
2 happen; anything on the trip up to Cu Chi?

3 WG: Well, there was a Viet Cong sniper that they had hanging from the tree. And
4 he had been dead for a month or so and they just left his body up there I guess to
5 intimidate the other VC's or whatever. So that's the first dead body I saw – combat. You
6 know, wounds.

7 LC: That's pretty horrific.

8 WG: Yep.

9 LC: Wow. Did the other guys on the truck kind of point it out and say, 'Check it
10 out'?

11 WG: Yeah, 'Look at that. It's been up there for a month.' They were very proud
12 of it. It was one of their war stories again that I decided not to listen to anymore.

13 LC: Gosh. That's kind of harrowing to even hear about it. What about arriving at
14 the 12th Evac? Now, did they take you directly to the compound?

15 WG: Yes. We went directly to the compound and we checked in with the
16 company commander and was assigned me to the emergency room and my hours were –
17 I think we worked twelve hours a day. I realize now how tired I was. I was extremely
18 tired the whole year I was in Vietnam and I couldn't really realize it because I was so
19 busy all the time. But now I realize how twelve hours a day, sometimes 24 hours a day,
20 you know...

21 LC: Did you have a proper place to sleep the hours that you were off?

22 WG: Yeah, there was what we called a Quonset hut and it was basically just to
23 keep the rain out. And then we built a bunker in the back so that when we had anything
24 come around we kept it in the bunker and hopefully not get hit by one of these rounds.

25 LC: How soon after you got there did you have to start pulling shift?

26 WG: Immediately. The next day I was in the emergency room taking care of
27 wounded. But initially it wasn't that bad. I mean, we had two or three a day. But then
28 that was just before Tet. The TET Offensive?

29 LC: Yes sir.

30 WG: So after it Tet, it was just outrageous. There was twenty or thirty people a
31 day.

1 LC: Can you tell me about – before the actual TET Offensive began, you guys
2 started to get increasing numbers of casualties?

3 WG: Right.

4 LC: What kinds of wounds were they? What was...?

5 WG: Mostly gunshot wounds or shrapnel. We were talking about this – some of
6 the veterans and myself were talking about – the guys getting wounded...didn't get
7 wounded by a gunshot wound. They were getting bombed. We were just getting
8 traumatic amputations all over the place.

9 LC: Yes.

10 WG: Poor kids. I don't know, I think theirs is worse than ours because of all
11 these suicide bombers.

12 LC: Yeah. Does that stuff, hearing about what's happening now, does that bother
13 you and send you...

14 WG: Oh yes, oh yeah, definitely.

15 LC: Yeah, it just kind of parallels everything and makes it more difficult. I'm
16 sure that it does. It won't surprise you, Bill. Other people that I'm interviewing and
17 talking to are saying the same thing, that it's just very tough to hear about that stuff and
18 you know, the un – earth stuff that they haven't thought about in a long time. It makes it
19 very difficult.

20 WG: Right.

21 LC: Bill, let me ask you about the people that you were working with in the ER.
22 The orderlies, the other medics, nurses, doctors...mostly nurses that you saw.

23 RG: It was mostly nurses, yeah.

24 LC: How did you get along with them and how did they get along with you?

25 WG: Well, I made it a conscious decision when I got to Vietnam that I would
26 have no friends and I guess that's basically because I didn't want grieve for anybody I'd
27 lose. Might even be killed or lose. So I was very hostile in Vietnam. Somebody would
28 say good morning to me, I would say, 'Fuck you. Get out of my face.'

29 LC: Really?

1 WG: Oh yeah. I'd say, 'Fuck you. Get out of my face,' and stuff like that. And
2 people left me alone. And quickly, when I started on the team treating wounded, they
3 just let me work. They just didn't, you know, give me that...

4 LC: They just let you get on with it?

5 WG: Right. They didn't give me any BS, you know, like guard duty. I didn't
6 have to do guard duties or stuff like that. It was stupid to me because if you do guard
7 duty and we're in the middle of the compound, they had to come past the infantry
8 divisions and armored divisions to get to us. (Laughs)

9 LC: Right. That doesn't make a whole lot of sense.

10 WG: Right.

11 LC: Did anybody, do you think; figure out why you were acting the way you
12 were? Did anybody try to figure it out?

13 WG: No, I don't think so. Well, a couple of guys, you know, when a new guy
14 comes in and they are greeted by the people that are up in there for a while, they're the
15 ones that would leave me alone because I was not someone who they would be friends
16 with or anybody you could talk to about intimate things.

17 LC: Right. You weren't kind of laughing and joking and hanging out.

18 WG: No, not at all.

19 LC: And you said you were essentially doing this, you were trying to protect
20 yourself.

21 WG: Right, exactly.

22 LC: Do you think it worked or did it make it harder for you?

23 WG: It worked in Vietnam but it made it harder for me when I got out.

24 LC: Oh okay.

25 WG: I was still grappling with the fact that I had to suppress all of these emotions
26 that I felt were dangerous to have in Vietnam. Some of them I still suppress and then it's
27 not doing me any good right now because it causes relationship problems, and it causes a
28 lot of problems that are pretty well PTSDs. Yeah.

29 LC: Right. Was there anybody that you did kind of let in at all over or there not?

30 WG: The girl that died, the little girl that died, I let her in and she made me cry.
31 (Laughs)

1 LC: Do you feel like you can tell me anything about her?
2 WG: She was the 7 – year – old girl that I wrote the poem about.
3 LC: Yes. It's in your letters.
4 WG: Right.
5 LC: Right. For someone who doesn't have access to your letters or hasn't read
6 them yet, can you just say a word or two about her?
7 WG: She was napalmed. She had napalm burns over a large percentage of her
8 body, fifty percent of her body. And she would be sitting in front of the – she was being
9 treated in the hospital and she would sit by the ward and when she saw me, she started
10 smiling and laughing because I would try to talk to her in Vietnamese and she said
11 (speaks Vietnamese) and she'd laugh. And so one time – and this is when I wasn't even
12 nice.
13 LC: Right.
14 WG: So one of my duties was to count the beds so I could call into the
15 headquarters and tell them I how many beds we had available in case of mass casualties
16 and we'd know how many people to take care of.
17 LC: Yes.
18 WG: So in the process of counting these beds, I came to her bed and she was
19 lying there with the sheets pulled over her. So I looked at her and I just walked over to
20 the bed and picked her up and the nurse and I think one of the corpsmen was going to
21 come and stop me and the other nurse, the senior nurse, said, 'Leave him alone.' So I
22 walked outside. It was pitch dark outside and I was walking with her and I was
23 apologizing to her and I was crying and I was saying, 'I'm sorry they did this to you.'
24 And I carried her out to what is called the connyx where we'd put the dead bodies in and
25 wait for the next patient to come up. And I carried her there and I laid her in there I
26 just...in the emergency room I just sat there and I guess that's when I started writing the
27 poem, writing the poem about her and that was the first time I cried in Vietnam and I
28 cried one more time in Vietnam and that was the last time I cried since.
29 LC: Is that right?
30 WG: Right.

1 LC: Bill, let me ask about the routine. On days when you did not have mass cal,
2 and this is before the TET Offensive, did you kind of get into a rhythm of doing the kinds
3 of maintenance activities and getting supplies out and all that kind of stuff and you just
4 got on with it?

5 WG: Basically, I remember reading a lot. My girlfriend sent me a ton of books.

6 LC: Did she really?

7 WG: Yeah. I remember reading a lot. I remember the routine of going to work
8 and just sitting there and waiting for something bad to happen.

9 LC: Is that how you felt most of the time?

10 WG: Yes, uh – huh. Well, I was scared twenty – four hours a day and I didn't
11 sleep that well, either.

12 LC: I'm sure you didn't.

13 WG: Because when I'd see something coming down, your initial reaction is to run
14 and then your higher brain level says, 'Where?' (Laughs)

15 LC: Right, exactly.

16 WG: (Laughs) So you just stand there and try to take it and hopefully it won't hit
17 you.

18 LC: How many nights in a week would you guys take a shell at night?

19 WG: Five...five or six.

20 LC: I mean, that's...

21 WG: Common, I mean, you know, when the sun when down, rockets started
22 coming in. There were mortars and rockets start coming in.

23 LC: Did you work at night partly because you were going to be up anyways or
24 how did that happen?

25 WG: Well, let's see...how did that happen? I worked...a helicopter pilot told me
26 I was always there when he landed so unless there was just one or two casualties a day, I
27 was there. I was overcompensating, they tell me. Now I was in the OR, obviously the
28 emergency room, I was helping out in medevac, I was taking people off of the
29 helicopters; I was shot at as I was saving a conniving Frenchie. He was a helicopter
30 gunman and he came – he was from Lisbon, Connecticut. He came out to San Francisco
31 to meet me and talk to me. And I tried to avoid meeting him but I finally...they set up a

1 meeting and I met with him and he came and thanked me for saving his life and I'm
2 going, 'There were so many of you. I don't know – I can't remember you.' He said, 'I
3 remember you and I just want to thank you for saving my life.' And that was one of the
4 things that got me into therapy, realizing that I had done some good although I had lost a
5 lot of people I had.

6 LC: When did he come to see you, Bill?

7 WG: Oh, about three years ago.

8 LC: No kidding. That must have been...I mean, I hear you that it's changed
9 something for you but when it actually happened, it must have been really intense. It was
10 a good thing for him to do.

11 WG: Yeah.

12 LC: Are you in contact with him yet?

13 WG: No, no, just that one time.

14 LC: But it did help you kind of see the experience a little differently.

15 WG: Right.

16 LC: Yeah.

17 WG: I wasn't a failure.

18 LC: I'm sorry, what?

19 WG: I wasn't a failure.

20 LC: No, yeah, I think you absolutely were not. There are a lot of people who are
21 alive or better off than they would have been if you had not been there. I am absolutely
22 sure of that. Bill, what can you tell me about the TET Offensive period? Can you
23 describe how things started to escalate?

24 WG: It was just escalated. They straddled along the base camp. That's when we
25 knew they were serious, because they straddled along the base camp. That one of the
26 only times I became close to shooting, to firing a weapon.

27 LC: What happened? Was it at night?

28 WG: It was at night and they hit the main gate first and they were running through
29 the main gate through our position. And I had a loaded M – 14 ready to fire and just
30 before I could do anything like that, the wounded started coming in. (Laughs)

31 LC: Is that right?

1 WG: So it was just...like the Army personnel carriers were just stacked with
2 bodies and I was downstairs, just started pulling out bodies, pulling body after body and
3 finally finding somebody who was alive and them putting them on a stretcher and taking
4 them in and going through the bodies again, trying to find somebody else who was alive.
5 There was blood everywhere. Blood. People screaming, people begging, people
6 grabbing my arm and asking me to help them and it was just...chaos and so I just put my
7 weapon away and started trying to save as many people as I could.

8 LC: Any idea, Bill, how many people you worked with through that period? Do
9 any of them stand out in your mind?

10 WG: Are you talking about the personnel at the hospital?

11 LC: Yeah. No, I mean, actually, the people that you were treating, the people that
12 you were working on.

13 WG: Oh yeah. There's a lot of...wounded guys who were asking me to tell their
14 parents some things like, you know, 'I love you,' and other things. They would hold my
15 arm and I would hold their hands and during that time when I was holding their hands –
16 because I knew they were going to die – so I was holding their hand so when their living
17 spirit left them, they would come through into me and would live within me as long as I
18 was alive. Which sounded like a good idea at the time (Laughs), which I'm paying the
19 price for right now, trying to send them away so that I can live again.

20 LC: Is that what you're trying to do?

21 WG: Yeah. There was about, I guess, fifty to a hundred people died. Just before
22 they died, I held their hands and kind of wished their spirit into me.

23 LC: Yeah, I mean, that's...Bill, were you able to, after this whole chaotic period,
24 and I know things continued on, you guys continued to get a lot of casualties for several
25 months, was there anything that you could do to make yourself sort of feel more kind of
26 whole and integrated? Did you have any tools at all?

27 WG: No.

28 LC: Okay.

29 WG: No.

30 LC: Did reading help?

1 WG: It just helped get my mind off what was going on around me to a little
2 degree.

3 LC: What about your letters that you were writing and receiving? How important
4 were they?

5 WG: Looking back on it, I realized I was writing those letters to my ex –
6 girlfriend. I was writing those letters to myself and I used her name just to have a reserve
7 because I told her to never throw these letters away because I think I would want them
8 later on. And I think that kind of helped me get through a lot of what I was going
9 through at the time, writing those letters. Reading them now, when I have a chance,
10 which is difficult for me to do still, but reading them now I realize how much emotion I
11 had to stuff in order to get the job done and how most of the – even though I was acting
12 like a bad guy, how I really was a spiritual person with these men. I said in a letter, I
13 loved them. I love these guys, these guys that were wounded and it was – I don't know
14 how to express that love, but I guess it was love of mankind, I guess. I don't know.

15 LC: Well, I also sense that you felt that – and maybe I'm wrong, you can correct
16 me – that this wasn't a good thing for us to be doing.

17 WG: No.

18 LC: I mean, you were questioning already, long before you got over there,
19 whether we should be there at all.

20 WG: Right.

21 LC: Did your sense of the – I don't know, you called it not a moral investment by
22 the United States. I mean, did your sense of this kind of injustice; did it harden up while
23 you were there because of all the suffering that you saw?

24 WG: I believe so, yes.

25 LC: Yeah, I would think it would. Did you ever get out of Cu Chi the whole year
26 you were there from what? September '67 to '68? Did you ever get out of Cu Chi?

27 WG: I used to go once a month to – they made me, because I was so good, they
28 made me the casualty clerk so I had to account for all the casualties at the 25th infantry
29 division head on a month period. But once a month I would go to the Long Binh, which
30 was the headquarters and I would hand them the casualty reports. And I could be gone
31 for a couple days but that's only time I left Cu Chi.

1 LC: What were things like over at Long Binh?

2 WG: It was like a country club. I mean, they had slide shows, they had hot and
3 cold running water, they had toilets that flushed they had girls that did little porn shows,
4 they had a cafeteria, they had...(Laughs) it was like hot and cold – like I said, I got to the
5 hot shower for the first time in months.

6 LC: Oh, jeez.

7 WG: I just didn't want to get out of the shower; it was just so...like a country
8 club. It was just...and a lot of people resented it because there were guys in the field
9 when people were – at like Cu Chi, like where I was, we were just flabbergasted by the
10 way they lived.

11 LC: Wow. Was there resentment?

12 WG: Yes.

13 LC: Did you feel any of that?

14 WG: Yes. Because I would come in, I would get off the helicopter and come in
15 and give my report and then I would – I was carrying a weapon. I had a 45 on my hip
16 and my shoes were dirty and my uniform wrinkled and these guys wore spit – shiny shoes
17 and ironed uniforms and all this other good stuff, you know. Those were clean men. We
18 resented the guys when we had to be out there and they were living the life of ease.

19 LC: Yeah. Was there resentment on top of that or parallel to that?

20 WG: I heard a lot of reports about drug use but most of that was in areas like
21 Long Binh where they were having...a lot of them had some racial conflict there, too, but
22 again I was in Long Binh. We didn't have racial conflict where we were because we
23 were all worried about living and dying. We weren't worried about who was black or
24 white or who could take care of us, who was left behind us on our mattress.

25 LC: You guys were under threat all the time.

26 WG: Right.

27 LC: Did you see though, Bill, people who were taking advantage in some way of
28 the availability of drugs and stuff in the hospitals to kind of either party or ease out or
29 whatever?

30 WG: Mostly it was ease out, but most of the people like that were people in the
31 combat, really, in the combat area. So we didn't – I mean, I didn't want to smoke

1 marijuana because I couldn't trust myself to get high because you never know when some
2 casualties would come in and I was always needed to be sober for that. So I wouldn't
3 smoke marijuana, I wouldn't take drugs, I wouldn't – I'd drink a little bit but I wouldn't
4 want to be drunk because I wanted to be there for the guys when they came in.

5 LC: You didn't want to be out of control.

6 WG: Right.

7 LC: Wow, and unable to do something to help. What, in Cu Chi, from whatever
8 you observed, what would you say was the drug of choice? What was easiest to get hold
9 of?

10 WG: It was marijuana of all types.

11 LC: Really?

12 WG: Everybody was...(Laughs)

13 LC: Everybody?

14 WG: Yeah, they would walk down the street like they was holding a cigarette and
15 it would be a joint.

16 LC: Did that worry you that other people were doing that and this is a combat
17 area?

18 WG: No, I pretty much relied on myself. I figured...like I said, I didn't have any
19 friends in Vietnam so I just relied on myself. I was...if necessary, I told them I was on a
20 patrol or some kind of...I don't know. We were supposed to be quite at night and these
21 guys were talking like it was a walk in the park and I would tell them, you know, to shut
22 up. (Laughs) They'd shut up for a while and then they'd start talking again. I'd say,
23 'Shut up,' and they'd stop talking for a while and then they'd start talking again and
24 that's when I locked and loaded my weapon and they heard that and they shut up.
25 (Laughs)

26 LC: Did you have to do that a couple, three times?

27 WG: Well, I wanted to live, and if they would have put my life in jeopardy, I
28 would have shot them.

29 LC: You would have?

30 WG: Yeah.

31 LC: Wow.

1 WG: My main thing was survival and that's the only wish that I expressed while
2 in Vietnam was survival. I didn't care about having to go to the bathroom, I didn't care
3 about I hadn't eaten in two or three days, I didn't care if I hadn't...all the mundane
4 things, you know.

5 LC: Sure. You were totally focused.

6 WG: My focus was on surviving.

7 LC: Yeah. Did you have access to music at all?

8 WG: No, I don't recall...oh, guys had their cassette players and stuff like that
9 when we were over there but I didn't listen to their music.

10 LC: Did anybody, for example, try to...I don't know, try to get you involved in
11 anything or did they pretty much just kind of give you your own space?

12 WG: After a while they just gave me my own space.

13 LC: When did the casualty flow into the hospital start to let down – or did it –
14 after the TET Offensive?

15 WG: I don't know. After the Tet, it was February. February, March, April. They
16 had a May offensive, too.

17 LC: Yes, they did.

18 WG: And it was – after that, it was about worse than the TET Offensive but
19 nobody says anything about that. So it was pretty steady. Until the May offensive it
20 went down a little bit but then they had a May offensive and we got swamped again.
21 May, June, July, August, September, October. I had five months left. And that was...I
22 can't recall it being...ever going down to what it was when I first got there. It was
23 always twenty or thirty guys coming in. We never once got it down to one or two guys a
24 day.

25 LC: Bill, what, in the ER when you were doing triage, what were the worst
26 wounds, the wounds you knew these guys were not going to make it? What were those
27 caused by?

28 WG: Traumatic amputations, guys that had lost both their feet or arms and legs
29 and the guys that had lost so much part of their blood that...it was something I used to
30 write about. I wrote the death certificates and the doctor signed them but I was the one
31 that wrote the death certificates. And exsanguination. I remember that. I had never saw

1 that word before Vietnam and I've never heard of it since Vietnam. But exsanguination
2 is bleeding to death and that's the cause of the death that was abundant, exsanguination.

3 LC: Did you have to work with the Graves Registration people, then?

4 WG: Only when I came to pick up bodies.

5 LC: Do you have any idea how they were handling what they were doing?

6 WG: No, I don't.

7 LC: Did you talk to them at all or not really?

8 WG: Not really, no. I know that now that there's one group or two with the most
9 PTSD because they saw all the – well, for example, I'm Casualty Clerk now and I have
10 access to all the casualty reports and how many people were killed during the week an the
11 month and all during the month.

12 LC: Yes.

13 WG: And I come to realize over there in a one year period of time I saw at least
14 five hundred GIs that are dying and about three times that in Vietnamese civilian
15 casualties. So...

16 LC: Did you ever have VC come in to the –

17 WG: Yes.

18 LC: For treatment?

19 WG: Yes.

20 LC: How'd that go?

21 WG: This guy was wounded in the leg. He was – the doctors were asking for an
22 x-ray and the x-ray technicians, who were drug addicts or potheads or whatever, they
23 were trying to cause this guy pain. I mean, they were slamming his leg and twisting his
24 leg and stuff like that. And I walked in the room and said, 'If you're that damn brave,
25 why don't you just get a weapon and walk outside and show how brave you really are?'
26 And that's when they stopped. (Laughs)

27 LC: They stopped?

28 WG: They stopped and gave me a dirty look and one of them gave me a dirty look
29 in Vietnam so I didn't really give a damn.

30 LC: Right, sure.

1 WG: So things like that you know, this one colonel came in and he was charge of
2 the artillery and they had to show him around and he hit this old man. And he was in
3 there apologizing to the men who were wounded. I walked up to him and said, ‘Why
4 don’t you go and apologize to the little one that’s outside?’ He looked at me and he went
5 up to the head of the hospital and asked him to look at me talking. I guess the head of the
6 hospital said, ‘That’s Bill, just leave him alone.’ (Laughs)

7 LC: Really.

8 WG: Yeah.

9 LC: So you had a reputation that pretty much everybody there, even all the way
10 up to the top, they knew, ‘Oh, that’s Bill.’ Did you see other Allies of the United States
11 come through there at all? Any Australians or –

12 WG: Not that I recall.

13 LC: Koreans?

14 WG: No.

15 LC: Okay. Did you have any kind of opinion about the Viet Cong? Clearly,
16 those x – ray tech guys were pissed off at the enemy and wanted to take it out on this one
17 guy and so on. Did you have opinions about this? I mean, I know earlier you had said,
18 ‘Look, this was a civil war and I’m not sure we should even be here.’

19 WG: I heard a lot of – you know, about their atrocities from the grapevine. The
20 VC had just come to this village – they came to Cu Chi. They came and told them they
21 took a census. They killed some of the village people so I knew what they were capable
22 of. But again, I didn’t think it was fair to try to make one man suffer for a whole country.

23 LC: And in some way, was that what it was about for you, was being fair and
24 trying to honorable?

25 WG: Right.

26 LC: That’s sort of what it sounds like. Bill, do you remember counting the time
27 until you were out of there?

28 WG: (Laughs) Yes, but the funny thing about that was, the mamason, the lady
29 that took care of my hooch, she ousted me one day and she came up to me and she said,
30 ‘You leave soon. You leave two months from now.’ I said, ‘I do?’ (Laughs) I had
31 completely forgotten about it. And she reminded me about it. I was going, ‘How does

1 she know?' But I don't know. She wrote me a letter and in her letter – I can't remember
2 the exact words – but the gist of the letter was she hoped that me and my family would
3 have a prosperous life and that I would think about her when I could. She wrote a nice
4 letter. And I wrote back to her that – it was all translated by an interpreter – but I wrote
5 back to her that I was glad I had met her and that I hoped that she and her family would
6 have a hopeful life and this war would end soon and they could go back to living where
7 they lived.

8 LC: Sounds like she didn't hate you.

9 WG: No.

10 LC: She probably – there was something there. She liked you. Bill, can you tell
11 me about actually getting out of Cu Chi and getting ready to get out of Vietnam?

12 WG: I had access to the pharmacy because I was a medic. And they had sleeping
13 pills in the pharmacy and I took some pretty powerful sleeping pills and I took three of
14 them. I mean, I took three of them and put them in my pocket. So when we got to
15 Kontum and we were getting ready to take off, we were hit. I mean, we were heading
16 into rounds and they let us off on the fresh troops and they were running around and
17 didn't know where to go and we were seasoned troops, the guys that were flying out of
18 there. We were putting them down and telling them to stay down and so one round just
19 stayed down. Finally, we got into the plane and the pilot said, 'You want to wait until the
20 all – clear or you want to take off?' We said, 'Take off.' (Laughs)

21 LC: (Laughs) Yeah.

22 WG: 'Let's just get the hell out of here.'

23 LC: Sure.

24 WG: So we took off and when I was high enough to know that there was no VC
25 rocket that could reach the plane, I took one sleeping pill and I slept from Vietnam to
26 Okinawa. And then we landed in Okinawa and refueled and I slept from Okinawa to...I
27 took another pill and slept from Okinawa to Hawaii. Then we reached Hawaii and we
28 offloaded and filled up and I took the third pill and slept from Hawaii to Oakland. So
29 when I got to Oakland it was like it was a bad dream. It was like it was a nightmare. It
30 was like a dream that never happened. Which...I didn't fool anybody but myself.

31 LC: Did you have any trouble getting from Oakland home?

1 WG: No, no, I just got a plane in San Francisco to Chicago.

2 LC: Anything going on at the airport in the way of protestors or people looking at
3 you funny or any of that? Nothing?

4 WG: Not me, no. A lot of us guys, they went and changed out of their uniforms
5 when we landed in Oakland. They went to the bathroom and changed their uniforms; a
6 lot of people.

7 LC: Did you do that?

8 WG: No, I didn't do that.

9 LC: Why not? Can you think?

10 WG: I don't know. I heard about all the stuff that was going on but I just
11 didn't...and plus, most of my friends were in the South Side of Chicago. Everybody was
12 black, too. There was none of this 'baby killer' and all this kind of stuff. But I didn't
13 experience it. But I was in a different place in time; I was insulated by my family and
14 friends.

15 LC: All of whom were just probably damn glad to see you back.

16 WG: Right, exactly.

17 LC: How did you parents react? Did they just take you right in like everything
18 was good?

19 WG: Oh yeah. My mother – well, for a while. (Laughs)

20 LC: Okay.

21 WG: My mother was glad to see me. She hugged and kissed me which was good
22 and that lasted for about two months and then she said, 'When you going to go back to
23 school? When you going to – you're okay now, you're going to need to be...' And I was
24 still, you know, having those horrible nightmares and she came in one night while she
25 was – I mean, one day when she was home from work and she leaned over and kissed me
26 on the forehead and I jumped up and I had my hand back to hit her and she screamed and
27 that's the only thing that woke me up because I was – somebody was trying to sneak up
28 on me in Vietnam and get me. But no, they were glad to see me and...oh, when I got to
29 Oakland, they wanted me to talk to a re-up sergeant. I said, 'Man, are you out of your
30 mind? (Laughs) No way I'm going to re-up for this stuff.' And they insisted, you know,
31 they weren't going to sign me out until I talked to this re-up sergeant so I gave in and he

1 started talking. And I said, 'You can say anything you want to say, I am not re-upping.'
2 So he signed and stamped me and then let me go.

3 LC: Did you still have some duty service time left when you got back to Chicago?

4 WG: No, I got off early. I got out early because I had a month left when I got it.
5 So they just said, you know, for a month, go home.

6 LC: And this was the fall of '68?

7 WG: Right.

8 LC: Did you in fact go right back to school?

9 WG: Well, yeah, January of '69, I went to the school of pharmacy and had my GI
10 Bill with me and I showed them my GI Bill and told them I wanted to start school and he
11 said, 'Well, you can start school in January and he took the GI Bill and then filed it away
12 and that's when I started back, January of '69 and two years later in '71 I got my degree
13 in pharmacy.

14 LC: And during that period, I know that you were I'm sure studying and trying to
15 get all that complicated stuff into your head but also, as you know, the whole antiwar
16 movement just exploded during that period and especially after the U.S. sent troops into
17 Cambodia which was down in your neck of the woods in Vietnam. How did you feel
18 about all that stuff? Did you get involved in it at all?

19 WG: I did. The one time I got involved was when those kids were killed at Penn
20 State and I protested. I was joined the people at the University of Illinois. The pharmacy
21 school, the dental school, the nursing school, and the medical school, we all got together
22 and protested the killing of those kids because my way of thinking, if they could kill
23 middle class white kids like that, there's nothing that they wouldn't do.

24 LC: Pretty much.

25 WG: And so that's the one time I did march. But most of the time I was – I guess
26 I was telling people if they asked me how did I get through school with all these quiet
27 times when they would have these flashbacks and stuff. Well, when I realized I had the
28 TV set on, I had the radio on, I had everything to distract me and not focusing on the
29 lessons so that I wouldn't let anything outside of that come in. I was like – when I would
30 have my PTSD when I would go to sleep and that's why I didn't sleep well for years.
31 Still not sleeping well, but anyways...that's when it would, especially when I was asleep.

1 LC: Just on that, for other veterans and people who are trying to understand this
2 PTSD phenomenon, I mean, is it to some degree that you're afraid to go to sleep?

3 WG: Well, I had this one on one and I've come to learn – one on one therapy –
4 and what I've come to learn that I've been used to anticipating the nightfall.

5 LC: Anticipating the what, Bill?

6 WG: Night. Nightfall. And I had been doing this for a year and when I came
7 back to the real world as you call it, my brain is still working on that cycle of nighttime is
8 dangerous. I wouldn't go out at night. Night was – I realized that I was afraid of the
9 night because my mind had been conditioned to be afraid of the night. So that's one way
10 it affects me and then I couldn't sleep at night because that's a dangerous time and so I
11 was barely sleeping until the dawn was breaking and that's when I would go into a deep
12 sleep but it was too late because I had to get up in about two or three more hours.

13 LC: To go to work.

14 WG: Right. (Laughs)

15 LC: And you did work as a pharmacist all those years.

16 WG: Oh yes, yes.

17 LC: Where did you work, Bill?

18 WG: when I graduated, I worked at a local pharmacy. Pharmacy, it's a small
19 pharmacy. And then I moved out here and out here I was working at Letterman Hospital
20 and that was interesting because there was a lot of Vietnamese. Well, no, Vietnam
21 casualties came in through there. And then after I left, I had my own store for about ten
22 years. Then Walgreen's moved next door and I had to leave there. And then I worked at
23 a hospital, mostly hospital pharmacies after that; clinical and hospital pharmacies.

24 LC: So you got crushed by Walgreen's?

25 WG: Right.

26 LC: Wow. Can I ask why you decided to move out to California?

27 WG: Well, my mother had moved out here and we used to come and visit, my ex
28 – wife and I. And the weather was so nice and Chicago's weather patterns was kind of
29 winter and stuff so I applied for Letterman Hospital and since I was – I was given priority
30 because I was a Vietnam veteran. So they hired me and they moved me out here and they
31 paid for all the moving and stuff.

1 LC: Really.

2 WG: So that's how I got out here.

3 LC: Did you have any feelings about the fact that Vietnam veterans got some
4 degree of preference in hiring, at least according to the letter of the law? Did you feel
5 like that was a good policy, good benefit?

6 WG: I thought it was good because we didn't have very many things going for us.
7 The GI Bill was not as good as GI Bills in the past and we weren't respected as – we
8 were always looked at as the root of the war, which we weren't. But I thought it was a
9 good thing to recognize us, at least a little bit.

10 LC: How about the broader issue of the Veterans Administration and how it's
11 handled the different demands?

12 WG: To my understanding – well, when I first got to back Chicago, I went to a
13 psychiatrist who had worked at the VA. And they gave me a bunch of test and then they
14 came out and said, 'Your IQ is such that you can do anything you want to do so – and if
15 you were crazy before you went to Vietnam...I mean, if you were crazy after you left for
16 Vietnam, you were probably crazy before you went.' I wanted to grab them around the
17 collar but I said 'No.' That's the last time I saw that VA. I made it my highest mission
18 to stay away from the VA. Later one, when I went to through a PTS kind of a depression,
19 I was walking – they have what they call a off-site clinic, you know, and I was walking
20 by there and I walked in and I started talking to this guy and this guy said, 'PTS – ' this
21 was after we'd talked for about an hour, he said, 'You have PTSD.' I said, 'Really?'
22 (Laughs) He said, 'Yeah.' I said, 'Well, I'm glad it's diagnosed now.' If it hadn't been
23 for that outreach program, I would have never have gone to the VA system again. And
24 now they're much more respectful for Vietnam vets and they don't give us all the crap
25 that they gave us for too long in the medical system and it has helped a lot.

26 LC: It has helped?

27 WG: Yeah.

28 LC: And are you doing some of the therapy that you mentioned? Are you doing
29 some of that through the VA?

30 WG: Yes, I'm going all of it through the VA.

31 LC: All of it? Okay.

1 WG: I have two groups and soon to be one. One group is a group of medics and
2 corpsmen which, when I first started the group was a revelation that people felt the same
3 way that I did about certain things, you know, how the loss of – we would never talk
4 about the people we saved. We would always talk about the people we lost. My nephew,
5 he joined the Navy about a year ago and he's going to be like his uncle Bill so he's being
6 trained to be corpsman. I'm going, 'Aw, man.' (Laughs)

7 LC: That's amazing. Is he proud of you, do you think?

8 WG: Yeah.

9 LC: That's cool.

10 WG: I don't know. He's just in there. I look at him and see all those EMTs and
11 say, 'Well, I don't know.'

12 LC: Well, it's his own way to go, in a way. He's seen something in you. Is he
13 likely to go to the Middle East?

14 WG: I'm hoping not, but he probably will. But what I'll do the moment he comes
15 back, I'm going to take him by the hand and go to the VA hospital (Laughs) and get him
16 therapy right away.

17 LC: Get him lined up; get him enrolled.

18 WG: Right.

19 LC: Bill, you sort of alluded to this before, but I wonder if you could say a few
20 words about the thought that I'm sure you've given over the years to U.S. involvement in
21 Vietnam. Not only your own involvement, but whether it was a good idea, whether there
22 was anything to have been accomplished.

23 WG: Looking back on the history now, it's funny, the history of Vietnam and I
24 know that what happened after World War II and the French. They kicked the French out
25 and then we got involved. No reason for us to be in there at all. Ho Chi Minh, if we had
26 talked to him, I swear he wanted to be like us or at least not our enemies. We're the ones
27 that wouldn't talk to Ho Chi Minh, we're the ones that went off our own court into their
28 country, which would have been a whole different scenario had we negotiated and talked
29 to Ho Chi Minh and his people. That's my opinion.

30 LC: How do you think, just kind of, your own observations, how do you think the
31 U.S. could have made that big a mistake?

1 WG: The gone-well theory. The Cold War thing that started after World War II,
2 that if we lost Vietnam, we would lose Thailand and we would lose Cambodia and we
3 would lose...in fact, we did lose those people but not because of...it was what we did in
4 both countries. The CIA – I was exposed to the CIA in Vietnam a couple times and they
5 didn't impress me. They didn't impress me as very smart people.

6 LC: What did you encounter there?

7 WG: Arrogance, know-it-alls. They think they know it all. Even the officers in
8 the military were sort of like all these guys and I wasn't impressed at all. They were
9 arrogant, they thought they knew it all and they didn't know crap.

10 LC: And the consequences of that were of course enormous. Huge.

11 WG: Right.

12 LC: Do you see, then, parallels with contemporary policy in Iraq for example?

13 WG: Well, I don't like President Bush. I'm not going to mess with these things in
14 this day and I don't think a lot of Vietnam vets like him. He went into Iraq for one
15 reason and one reason only. Saddam Hussein tried to kill his father and he was going to
16 get even with Saddam for putting a contract out on his father. When he was elected
17 president, he was going to go to war, no doubt about it. And 9-11 gave him an excuse.
18 And doesn't see, I mean he doesn't seem to have the conscience to feel guilty about
19 sending all these people out to die and the casualties we've got the Iraqi people suffer.
20 So it's hopeless as far as I'm concerned. It's something that we'll all remember when we
21 get him out of office.

22 LC: Do you see any similarities between all of this? You know, us sending tens
23 and tens of thousands of troops over to Iraq and now it's – I mean, certain leaders in the
24 Senate have come out and said Iraq is a quagmire. Does this ring bells for you about the
25 Vietnam situation?

26 WG: Right, it does.

27 LC: And that, I'm sure, Bill, has to be tough and trying for you given your own
28 personal involvement.

29 WG: Yeah, I mean, I look at these soldiers in there and to me, they're kids and I
30 know how much I had to grow up in combat and I know these kids going out there,

1 they're all sent home and stuff with all this. Seeing their first casualty's going to change
2 that real quick.

3 LC: You mentioned in the group work that you've been doing that you're talking
4 to other medics and corpsmen from the Vietnam period. Are there other people that
5 you're talking to who were at Cu Chi?

6 WG: As hard as it is, early on there was a couple of nurses that were in the group.
7 It was a group that had doctors, medics, nurses, and so on. And two of the nurses were
8 from the hospital back at Cu Chi.

9 LC: Your same time period or a different time?

10 WG: No, different time periods but they were there. We found out that we just
11 missed each other by months.

12 LC: Does it make a difference to you to speak with not just Vietnam veterans but
13 people who were trying to be caregivers over there? Does it make a different exchange?

14 WG: No, no. No, the nurses that – I understood that nurses went through a lot of
15 stuff. I mean, I'm going to be sexist now, but the feminine qualities are caring those were
16 pushed to the limit in Vietnam and a lot of these nurses broke down.

17 LC: Yes. Yes, they did.

18 WG: (Laughs) Even some of the men broke down.

19 LC: That's right. That's right.

20 WG: So I understand. I've talked to one officer who was not involved as a medic.
21 He was a leader of a crew of guys and he made me realize that they were scared, too. I
22 mean, these officers were scared, too. They didn't know it all; they were just trying to
23 get their men out of there without getting anybody killed. So that made me realized that
24 all the warrant officers weren't bad. Most of them were (Laughs) but not all of them.

25 LC: Right. But some of them, yeah, as you say, it's just like you said earlier that
26 not everybody's the same. Bill, is there anything that I haven't asked you that you would
27 like to contribute? Any observations or insights, either about your own experience or
28 about the conflict in general?

29 WG: Well, the only thing I know, and I say it with all the conviction that I can
30 muster is that when people come back from war, they should be debriefed. They should
31 be taken care of, they should be reintegrated into society and unless we do that, we're

1 going to have a lot of war casualties down the road. And my hope is that they tell these
2 kids that's coming out now about the VA system and how to use it and how to let go of
3 those emotions of hate and war and stuff and learn to reintegrate into a society of love
4 and peace.

5 LC: Bill, do you think you would have been better off if somebody had tried to
6 help with that transition for you?

7 WG: Yes, I would have. It took me thirty years to just seek help after running
8 into the VA's initial run-in. I would have made better sources of mates. We enjoyed life.
9 I've been hesitant to enjoy life because so many people that died won't have that chance
10 to enjoy life, people that I saw that I couldn't save. Now I realize I couldn't save
11 everybody. I probably knew that intellectually, but emotionally I tried to save them all.

12 LC: Right. And you paid a pretty heavy price for it.

13 WG: Right, right.

14 LC: But it seems from what you said that things are looking up now.

15 WG: Right, right.

16 LC: Do you feel optimistic at all about the future, your future?

17 WG: I'm going to start going to more plays and going to more jazz clubs and
18 symphonies and I'm gong to start enjoying life. You know, having what's left of my life
19 and enjoy it.

20 LC: And having your good self – back.

21 WG: Right, right.

22 LC: Well, Bill, thanks for doing this interview. I appreciate it very much.

23 WG: Okay.