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**The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Project  
Interview with Tony Nadal  
Conducted by Dr. John R. Milam  
Date 10 November 2005  
Transcribed by Mark Steven Varela**

**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.

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Dr. John R. Milam: Texas Tech University and the Vietnam Center. Today I am interviewing Tony Nadal. Tony, I would like to start with you just kind of identifying for us what your responsibilities were, your MOS (Military Occupational Specialty Code), November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1965.

Tony Nadal: I was the captain commander of Company A, 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry.

JM: Knowing that's what you're going to be doing, leading a company into the Ia Drang Valley on November 14<sup>th</sup>, let's back up a little bit. Let's go back to when you first joined the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cav. What month and year did you join?

TN: I joined in August of '65. I had been in graduate school in Oklahoma studying—wait a minute, let me back up, that was wrong. I had just finished the armor career course. I'm an infantry officer but I had been sent to the armor career course. I had gone to finish that course, had gone to Fort Benning for pathfinder school and then was home for thirty day leave in Oklahoma, on orders to Korea, to command a rifle company in Korea. I had been to Vietnam, prior to the career course as a special forces and attachment commander and was very interested in going back to Vietnam, and if there was a war going on, I'd rather command my company during the wartime than in Korea. After many calls to Fort Benning—I mean, after many calls to the personnel office of the

1 army, to try to get my assignment change, one day I got an unexpected phone call, about  
2 four in the morning and said, "Report to Fort Benning in three days." The reason was  
3 President Johnson had decided to send the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav to Vietnam and they were in the  
4 process of building up the unit. So here they had a guy that wanted to go and on orders to  
5 somewhere else and they changed my orders and sent me to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav. When I reported  
6 to Fort Benning, within that probate two-week period, there was something like, two-  
7 three-four thousand officers reporting in at the same time, to fill the division to the full  
8 company of officers.

9 JM: So you volunteered in the strictest sense of the words for this particular, or  
10 for Vietnam for a troop command.

11 TN: That's true.

12 JM: You were in 18<sup>th</sup>? Special forces, what year?

13 TN: '63, '64.

14 JM: So you were there during the advisory effort, you saw the changeover to a US  
15 ground troop operation. In between, you were in graduate school?

16 TN: No, I was the armored officer career course. I went to grad school after I  
17 came back from this assignment from the cav.

18 JM: You were class of '58?

19 TN: Class of '58, West Point.

20 JM: Now, so the 1<sup>st</sup> Air Cav had been formed up for about eighteen months before  
21 that. Had been undergoing training as an air cav unit, you didn't participate in that  
22 training at Benning. You just got on the boat with them?

23 TN: That's correct.

24 JM: When did you get your assignment as CO (Commanding Officer) of Alpha  
25 Company?

26 TN: That's an interesting story. When I reported into Fort Benning, they had a  
27 gymnasium. They had this big desk set up and the G1 section was assigning officers. You  
28 know, they had a chart and said, "Okay, you go there, you go here." And putting names  
29 in. I said, "Well, I want to command a rifle company." They said, "Well, we don't have  
30 one right now, we're going to make you the signal officer of the first brigade." I said, "I  
31 really don't want to be a signal officer. You can do a lot of things with it, but not a signal

1 officer.” So I went—they said, “Report to the 1<sup>st</sup> brigade in a couple of days.” Or  
2 something. Basically, I went AWOL and went looking for a job. I had a friend who was  
3 in the 1<sup>st</sup> of 7<sup>th</sup> Cav, John Herren, who commanded B Company. So I went down there  
4 and went to see the brigade commander of the third brigade. I said, “I want to command a  
5 rifle company. I’ve been to Vietnam, I have experience in combat, I’ve led patrols and  
6 that sort-of thing, I’ve done all sorts of things. Ambushes, counter-ambushes, etc. So I  
7 like to command a rifle company.” The brigade commander was named Tim Brown. He  
8 said, “Well, this is very unusual to someone to knock on my door looking for a job. What  
9 did the G1 section say?” I said, “I don’t know, I’m here sir, they sent me off to the 1<sup>st</sup>  
10 brigade.” He said, “Why don’t you go see Hal Moore?” So, I went down to see Colonel  
11 Moore. The same conversation, “Why are you here? What about the G1 section?” I said,  
12 “Well, I don’t want to go become a signal officer.” He says, “Let me call Colonel  
13 Brown.” So he calls Colonel Brown, Colonel Brown called the G1 and they said, “Oh,  
14 that’s where he is.” And they said, “Okay, you can have him.” Initially, I was the S2 of  
15 the battalion.

16 JM: So Colonel Moore at the time brought you in as the S2, the intelligence  
17 officer of the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 7<sup>th</sup>?

18 TN: Right. I did that for a couple of months and—

19 JM: So you did that for a couple of months, meaning you did that when you first  
20 went to Vietnam?

21 TN: Right. Then there was A Company that was commanded by a first lieutenant.  
22 Then there was an instant where- and I have been battering Colonel Moore about it, “Sir,  
23 I really want a company.” He said, “You’ll get your chance, you’ll get your chance.”  
24 There was an instance where a company lost a soldier through drowning. A Company  
25 did. Colonel Moore, I think made the decision. I was a senior, but I was also a lot more  
26 experienced at the time than that young lieutenant. So he gave me command of A  
27 Company.

28 JM: In your battalion, in the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 7<sup>th</sup>, were you the only Vietnam combat  
29 experienced company commander?

30 TN: Yes. Company commander.

31 JM: There wouldn’t be any platoon leaders that were?

1           TN: No.

2           JM: We had Plumley and Moore that were World War II and Korea experienced  
3 but they—

4           TN: Let me back up and say that Ray Lefebvre, who commanded D Company,  
5 had been an advisor. But I don't remember if he joined us before we went to Vietnam or  
6 after we got there. Once we got to Vietnam, there was an infusion program where they  
7 took some officers out of the cav and brought in officers who'd been advisors. I don't  
8 know whether Ray came in that group or he went with us.

9           JM: I see.

10          TN: I'd like to correct something early and this is a point I want to make. My tour  
11 with the special forces was not what you would call the advisory tour. I command the  
12 camp up in the northeast—northwest section of South Vietnam, just south of A Sầu  
13 Valley. There was very little advising done. There was a Vietnamese counterpart, but he  
14 didn't do anything. Basically, I was a camp commander, I ran it. I lead the patrols, I paid  
15 the soldiers, I organized the camp defenses, I did everything up there.

16          JM: Were they Vietnamese or Montagnard's?

17          TN: They were Vietnamese soldiers in the main part and there was Vietnamese  
18 advisors, the Vietnamese special forces team were all Vietnamese. In the camp, we had a  
19 platoon of Chinese that were called NUS and that's a very interesting story by the way  
20 but doesn't fit in with this.

21          JM: But you had experienced combat in a jungle environment, so your advisory  
22 role was what you were listed as, America's role at that time was an advisory effort.

23          TN: Yeah, true.

24          JM: Okay so, let's talk about this. You went over as the S2. The battalion S2.

25          TN: Right.

26          JM: And you get into country and you set up your base at An Khe. Tell me a little  
27 bit about that S2 role because that's a little bit interesting to me that you preceded your  
28 command with that. For example, what was the intelligence?

29          TN: Well, see that—having been a special forces commander and running that  
30 camp, I had been intimately involved in trying to set up intelligence networks. There was  
31 a village right below my camp. Part of mission, way up near the ocean border and miles

1 from any support of anyone, was defending this little village. So I was involved much  
2 more actively than a typical battalion officer is in developing intelligence. When I  
3 became S2 of the battalion, I started to look around An Khe and I contacted the special  
4 forces people, there was a special forces camp by An Khe. I said, "Okay, now how am I  
5 going, what's my network going to be?" Well, the army I think the G2 division people  
6 were all surprised you know, "What the hell is this captain doing trying to set up  
7 intelligence?" As a battalion S2, my job was to, in their view, receive intelligence from  
8 higher and then develop intelligence, pretty much battlefield intelligence. You get into a  
9 fight, you capture people, but the issue of locating units and trying to find what the  
10 enemy is up to and so forth, that was viewed outside my purview. Hal Moore thought I  
11 was—I think he liked what I was trying to do. But he thought it was somewhat unusual.

12 JM: How about you're counterparts in S2s of the other battalions and the brigade?  
13 Were they fine with it?

14 TN: They were very much doing the traditional thing.

15 JM: Okay. So you're kind of doing your own thing if you will, trying to, based on  
16 your special forces' experience and why not because everyone else is new in-country too.  
17 All these American units are enlisted to come in, their S2 are brand new at this too.  
18 You're trying to put together an intelligence network. Did you know anything about the  
19 PAVN (People's Army of Vietnam) movement into the valley?

20 TN: No. That was long ways away from An Khe. We had no idea that was going  
21 on.

22 JM: Way west of you?

23 TN: Yeah. Our first awareness of anything happening out in the Pleiku-Ia Drang  
24 area was when we started hearing about this special forces camp at Plei Me, Charlie  
25 Beckwith's camp.

26 JM: When did you get command of the Alpha Company?

27 TN: August.

28 JM: You got command in August?

29 TN: Yeah, I forget the exact date.

30 JM: So it was a little bit later in August then, because you got there—

1           TN: Oh, excuse me, no. We got there in August. I probably got command the end  
2 of September. Something like that.

3           JM: September. So you had about six weeks with your Alpha Company before  
4 you went into X-Ray.

5           TN: The first combat operation I lead was called "Silver Bayonet". It was really  
6 the first major combat operation the battalion was involved in. It was a big air assault  
7 down to a valley between An Khe and Qui Nhon, down the flats. We went there because  
8 it was really kind of a warmup operation.

9           JM: You didn't at that time know what was coming. At the time that you went  
10 into "Operation Silver Bayonet", it was a battalion sized operation?

11          TN: No, it was bigger than that. It was several battalions.

12          JM: Several battalions? Okay. Enemy contact?

13          TN: Very light. I think my rifle company killed the first Viet Cong killed by the  
14 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade in a night ambush.

15          JM: So the enemy, was essentially, VC (Viet Cong) and there was no evidence of  
16 any NVA (North Vietnamese Army) activity on "Silver Bayonet"?

17          TN: Not that early on.

18          JM: You get about six weeks then, it sounds to me like, including an operation  
19 like "Silver Bayonet" with your company, with your Alpha Company. Was your Alpha  
20 Company up to TOE (Table of Organization and Equipment)?

21          TN: No.

22          JM: What percent would you say?

23          TN: Probably seventy-five to eighty percent because couple of things happened.  
24 We took with us any soldier who had, I think it was, two months left in the army was  
25 directed to go to Vietnam. So, we carried with us a whole bunch of soldiers that we knew  
26 that we were going to rotate back home shortly after we got there. The other thing that  
27 happened was- not only to us, but the whole division, we got hit by a type malaria called  
28 "Falciparum Malaria", which the US medical, the Army Medical Corps was unprepared  
29 for. I think there was intelligence failure of the Medical Corps, medical intelligence. The  
30 anti-malaria tablet they gave us, which was primaquine, was ineffective against this type  
31 of malaria. It was very, very violent and very serious. This went to the brain and one of

1 the first casualties of this was my forward observer. Young man that eventually died  
2 next to me in Bong Son, but he was evacuated all the way back to Hawaii. Temperatures  
3 above a hundred-and-four and it was bad, bad, bad.

4 JM: I see. Then he came back from that and he was killed in Bong Son?

5 TN: Yeah.

6 JM: What about your leadership? Were you up to speed, up to TOE with your  
7 leaders?

8 TN: I had three good young lieutenants, all of them were ranger and airborne  
9 qualified. One of the great virtues of the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 7<sup>th</sup>, was the leadership they had. In my  
10 army career, I had never been in a battalion that had as good leadership throughout the  
11 battalion as we did in the 1<sup>st</sup> of the 7<sup>th</sup>. It started with General Hal Moore, who was a  
12 superb army officer. The company commanders John Herren, a West Point classman,  
13 again ranger airborne. Bob Edwards, highly qualified. They've—

14 JM: These were your peers at the company level?

15 TN: My peers. The battalion S3 was a guy named Greg Dillon, retired as a  
16 colonel, he's probably the best S3 I've ever seen. Very calm, very good natured, very  
17 competent person which allowed—his competence allowed Hal Moore to spend a lot  
18 more time on the ground, leading soldiers and worrying about soldiers, and not worrying  
19 about communications with headquarters or developing battle plans because between  
20 Greg and Hal, there was a great deal of mutual confidence and they work very well  
21 together. Most of my NCOs (Non-commissioned Officer) or many of my NCOs were in  
22 the upper ranks. The platoon sergeant and some of the sergeant first classes were Korean  
23 War veterans.

24 JM: Korean War? Okay. So, they were older? In their mid-thirties and that kind of  
25 thing?

26 TN: Right. That's right.

27 JM: Had been involved in ground combat in Korea?

28 TN: Right, in Korea. Lot of CIBs (Combat Infantryman Badges) in the—when  
29 you lined up for a parade, they were these guys with stripes. A lot of senior stripes,  
30 there's CIBs and Korean ribbons and all that.

1 JM: Now did you make an effort in putting your unit together, once you got it in  
2 September to make sure that you had senior NCO Korean combat veterans and platoons  
3 where you had first lieutenant or second lieutenants? I can't remember now, first  
4 lieutenants?

5 TN: Second lieutenants.

6 JM: Second lieutenants because later in the war it becomes a one-year you're a  
7 first lieutenant but back in the early days I believe it was eighteen months or something  
8 and it wasn't automatic. So you had second lieutenants, but did you make an effort to  
9 bring in the senior NCOs into those particular—to make sure you had it lined up that  
10 way?

11 TN: No, because I think when I reflect on it, they all were. I mean, all my platoon  
12 sergeants and the first sergeant were Korean War veterans. Several of the squad leaders  
13 were also. I had a first lieutenant company exec, George Jennings who was a good guy.

14 JM: Of the—you had three rifle platoons and a weapons platoon?

15 TN: Right.

16 JM: Of the four platoon leaders, second lieutenants, do you remember the  
17 commissioning sources of those four?

18 TN: All of my lieutenants were commissioned through OCS (Officer Candidate  
19 School). But the three platoon leaders, rifle platoon leaders were college graduates.

20 JM: But all OCS, so that means OCS but college graduates?

21 TN: Right.

22 JM: So that means they had gone to universities that either didn't have ROTC  
23 (Reserve Officer Training Corps) programs or they elected to not be in ROTC.

24 TN: Right.

25 JM: They had all been commissioned through the infantry—US Army Infantry  
26 School at Fort Benning and OCS?

27 TN: That's right.

28 JM: That's interesting, interesting. Can you tell me, without thinking too hard  
29 about it, through the other companies in the battalion, was that typical? Leadership wise?  
30 Commission Wise?

1           TN: We had—the platoon leaders throughout the battalion came out of primarily  
2 one class of the OCS at Fort Benning, one or two classes and these guys had been  
3 together through OCS as a group. I think because they fill up the cav all at once, they  
4 took— “Okay, all of you kids graduating today, you go to the 1<sup>st</sup> Cav.” So, we got a  
5 whole bunch of guys. But many of them- I can’t think of one who’s not a college  
6 graduate.

7           JM: Well, forgive me for dwelling on that, but I’m a graduate of the infantry  
8 school as myself, so it’s an interest to me and there’s been a lot of studies done about  
9 that, some of which are mine so that’s why I’m asking these questions.

10          TN: I had a chance recently to speak, one of my lieutenants Joe Marm, won the  
11 Medal of Honor. He invited me to speak to a reunion of a OCS class and it was great for  
12 me because I was able to say, “I have admired you all and many of you have seen in  
13 perilous conditions and leading sergeant in combat. I have a great deal of affection for all  
14 of you.” And I do, because I knew many of those young men under the stress of battle.

15          JM: Interesting. So you got you OCS trained. Korean War veterans NCOs. You  
16 got six weeks to getting to know your troops including Operation “Silver Bayonet”,  
17 which was probably exactly what you needed in a sense that the troops feared when  
18 they’re out there but the amount of activity was low. Then you’re back in base camp and  
19 you get word that there’s another operation. You’re going to move to Pleiku to stage for  
20 that?

21          TN: Yeah. Let me say something about my assumption in command. The troops  
22 knew—one of the things I did before we got to Vietnam, when I joined the battalion, Hal  
23 Moore knew my background in special forces and all this. I had been an avid reader of  
24 counter-insurgency operations books and whatever, I read a lot. I brought this footlocker  
25 full of book with me when I joined the battalion. So he had me give classes at Benning on  
26 counter-ambush drills and lot of things we had to learn in special forces and also through  
27 my reading. There was a good little book the British put out, called the *Small Wars*  
28 *Manual* and it was much better than anything the US Army had about counterinsurgency.

29          JM: Was it relaying experiences?

30          TN: Yeah, from relaying experiences. I had a copy of that, so I taught a lot of  
31 classes. So he troops in the battalion knew me, they knew my background and whatever.

1 When I joined the company, what I'm told by the soldiers, I've been told this for forty  
2 years now, it was a great deal of relief and enthusiasm for my arrival because they said—  
3 they felt we're not getting an experienced guy, with experience here and combat  
4 experience or whatever, which I thought was better for them.

5 JM: Sure, absolutely. Let's talk about November 13<sup>th</sup>.

6 TN: Okay.

7 JM: The day before you assault into X-Ray. What was involved that day, in terms  
8 of your role?

9 TN: Can I backup for a couple of days?

10 JM: Sure.

11 TN: We went to Pleiku. You have to remember Plei Me has been under siege, the  
12 cav went up there with artillery primarily and ARA (Aerial Rocket Artillery) and  
13 supported the battle. The 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade went in and looked for the enemy, didn't really find  
14 them but they found some, the 9<sup>th</sup> Cav, the Air Cav squadron, found a hospital and  
15 they're going to fight one night a very tough fight. The picture to us was, "The enemy is  
16 here, we haven't found them in numbers, but we've had one big tough company-sized  
17 fight, and they found a hospital and all this other kind of stuff." 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade was there for  
18 about two weeks after Plei Me and then they brought us in. They said "Okay, you're  
19 going to go look in this area." Well, they put us in that area, we broke down by  
20 companies. This was not near LZ (Landing Zone) X-Ray. This was east of LZ X-Ray.  
21 We spent about ten days doing small unit platoon size patrols over this big area looking  
22 for the enemy. Did not find them. We were due to be pulled out. Two days hence to be  
23 replaced by 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade. On the twelfth, Hal Moore calls us together and says "Okay, we  
24 have a new mission. The brigade has some intelligence that there is an enemy force  
25 somewhere." He drew a goose egg on the map. Right at the base of Chu Pong Mountain.  
26 Our mission is to go there and see what's there. That was about the degree of intelligence  
27 we had.

28 JM: I see.

29 TN: "We believe there's an enemy base camp, but we don't know how many,  
30 anything. You guys going to go there to see what's there." We were all spread out. On the  
31 twelfth we're all spread out in platoon sized locations. The air assault on the fourteen was

1 difficult because there weren't many helicopters and got to make a lot of trips to pick up  
2 this group here, this group over here, and this group over here.

3 JM: So you didn't stage from one central location?

4 TN: No.

5 JM: Your choppers had to go out and get you. Give me an example with your  
6 company. Let's talk about Alpha company, where were you?

7 TN: I was, I guess, about twenty minutes flying time East of LZ X-Ray, twenty,  
8 thirty minutes of flying time, I think. I was with a platoon and with company  
9 headquarters of the, I think the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon and the weapons platoon were together. So  
10 they picked me up, there were eight helicopters as I recall.

11 JM: On the first lift in?

12 TN: No, the first lift in was B Company.

13 JM: Okay, B Company went in first. So you're going to be second lift in?

14 TN: I'm going to be second lift in. After they put B Company, they came to get  
15 me. I went in with that platoon. Choppers went back and picked up the second platoon  
16 and went back for the third platoon.

17 JM: You ultimately had your three platoons, but they were coming from different  
18 places. You were with 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon?

19 TN: 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon.

20 JM: You were with 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon. As I understand the battle, the first few lifts in  
21 receive no fire. But about lifts three and four, they start getting fire. Where were you  
22 guys? Were you in the three and four? Or were you—

23 TN: When I landed, I sensed no fire. I immediately reported to Hal Moore, who  
24 told me, "B Company in engaged. You get your company and join them with a left  
25 flank." So the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon landed and I led them over to where B Company flank was. I  
26 went back to wait for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon to come in. I had to place them when they  
27 arrive. By then, at that time, I could hear bullets. I got gunshots and few bullets whizzing  
28 by.

29 JM: So Moore put you on the left flank of B Company, anticipating a flanking  
30 movement.

1           TN: See, the mission was—when we landed, the mission was going to be B  
2 Company initially holding the landing zone, that they we're going out in one direction.  
3 Then, my company would land, and we would go in a different direction, and then, C  
4 Company would land, and they would hold the landing zone. But when the fighting  
5 started, Moore said to me, "Okay, you're going to secure the landing zone and I'm going  
6 to have B Company move to the west." where the famous creek bed ran, on the western  
7 edge of the LZ. He said, he told John Herren, "You go west and explore what's out  
8 there." I send my platoon to the left of B company and they got in a fight pretty quickly,  
9 the moment they got there.

10           JM: How difficult was it to get your—you're in charge of all three of these  
11 platoons, did you have four platoons now? What did you do with the weapons platoon?

12           TN: They had taken the weapons platoon, which by that time they had become  
13 quite small because the 81 mortar, which was too heavy to carry into the jungle. Each  
14 company had to come down to—evolved to carrying one mortar, 181, and fire direction  
15 center crew for that one mortar and a couple of additional guys to hold the ammo. The  
16 weapons platoons had probably been halved in size and the troops had been used as  
17 replacement infantrymen.

18           JM: Organizationally, as you think about it, you were thinking about three  
19 platoons. That was your responsibility.

20           TN: They had taken all those small weapon platoons and put them together at the  
21 landing zone, to operate sort of as a weapons company kind of thing.

22           JM: I understand. So now you've got responsibility for three rifle platoons, most  
23 of whom, except for your Korea experienced MCOs and yourself, had never been in  
24 combat, never had a shot fired.

25           TN: Right.

26           JM: You hit the LZ, you start taking fire shortly thereafter. How difficult was it  
27 for you to pull those platoons into their positions?

28           TN: Not difficult. They landed, I met the lieutenants and said, "Okay you link up  
29 with so and so. First platoon over there." This is a small landing zone. We were going  
30 from where the helicopters landed to the creek bed. Wasn't more than 150 yards at most,  
31 100 yards. I started in the right direction and wait for the next one to come in.

1 JM: Tell me about the first—your observations of the first reactions of your  
2 troops to enemy fire.

3 TN: Hit the ground and started firings sort of wildly in the direction of the enemy.  
4 Let me give you a sequence of events of what happened. 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon lands and goes over  
5 to the left. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon lands, goes between the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon and B Company. The 3<sup>rd</sup>  
6 Platoon lands, and B Company has sort of moved out, so the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon lands and  
7 becomes my right-flank platoon. Actually, I got the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon in place, I hear intense  
8 enemy fire coming from the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon area because the creek bed came down right into  
9 where the 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon was and there were in an L shape position, open flank over here  
10 because C Company hadn't arrived yet and the enemies was coming out of creek bed.  
11 They get into a heavy fire fight but I'm not hearing much on the radios, about what's  
12 happening. So my radar operators and I, and the FOs (Forward Observers), we go across  
13 the landing zone and I'm looking for the platoon leaders. The landing zone is grassy.  
14 There is grass about this high (Editor's note: Interviewee shows height using his arms)  
15 which is a key factor in this fight for the next three days because when someone goes to  
16 ground, you can't see them. We couldn't see the enemy and they couldn't see us if we  
17 we're laying down in this grass. As I'm moving over there, I sort of stumble up on the  
18 Platoon Sergeant, Sergeant Nathan. I said, "Where's Lieutenant Taft?" He said,  
19 "Lieutenant Taft is dead." I said, "Well, where is he?"

20 JM: Which platoon was he?

21 TN: He was 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon—excuse me, 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon. I said, "Well, where is he?" He  
22 said, "He's in the creek bed." They had pulled back from the creek bed due to the enemy  
23 fire. As the book points out, one of my machine gunners went back, had a lot to do with  
24 holding that sector by staying in the fight even after his—he was assistant machine  
25 gunner and his machine gunner was shot in the head. Bill reaches over puts the guy's  
26 brains back in his head and the guy survived. One of the things that I believe in, one of  
27 the things Hal Moore believes in, one of the things I told my soldiers all the time was  
28 "We're not going to leave any one of you behind." I went forward to the creek bed; my  
29 radio operator and I went forward to bring back Lieutenant Taft. He was still in the creek  
30 bed; they were throwing grenades at me. They were little, tiny potato mashers sort of  
31 grenades like the Germans had in World War II, with a little tiny hat like that. When I

1 was in the creek bed, I see them going off on the edge of the creek bed. When I was  
2 there, I found another solider. Taft was dead, but there was another solider there who was  
3 shot in the gut, who also got left behind. I did this backwards, but I should've brought the  
4 other solider back first, but I brought Taft back and then Sergeant Gillam, my radio  
5 operator, and I went back and brought the other solider back.

6 JM: You say you should've brought him back because—

7 TN: One was dead, and one was alive.

8 JM: In reading then Colonel Moore's after action report, he talks about—not this  
9 specific instance, but he talks about that issue of the dead holding up the living from  
10 being able to, not exactly operate, but I think it's more of what you described to me that  
11 decision that has to be made on—

12 TN: One of the lessons learned by all of us, and I made a point of telling everyone  
13 that was, when soldiers—when you have a very cohesive unit, and this is something we  
14 really haven't mentioned, I joined the company late but the battalion has been through  
15 those eighteen months of training and those platoon sergeants had been through it. Not  
16 the lieutenants but many of the other officers, the battalion staff. These guys really—  
17 there were much like the units we sent to Iraq today. They trained together and we went  
18 to war together, we didn't have individual rotation thing, which was a disaster for the US  
19 Army after that. These sergeants knew their soldiers, they knew their soldier's families.  
20 What happened in the battlefield was that the sergeant felt responsible for that solider. In  
21 that instance of a sergeant—later on in the afternoon when I led the assault, the soldiers  
22 were all lying in the grass, the battle is going on and I see the sergeant start out for a  
23 solider that has been hit, and I tell him, "Sergeant Floyd, don't do that! You're going to  
24 get shot!" He looked at me, sort of disregarded me and went out to rescue his solider and  
25 effectively got shot. He died there. After that battle, I used to tell my guys, "If someone is  
26 killed or if somebody is shot, your first responsibility is to shoot the son of a bitch that  
27 shot him. Because if you go after him right then, the guy that shot him is going to shoot  
28 you." That's a tough lesson to learn. Medics, who as a group, are probably as heroic a  
29 group as anyone in uniform, lose a lot of lives going after a wounded solider. But you  
30 know, you think the logic of it, someone just shot someone right there and until you get  
31 him, he's going to do it again.

1           JM: Yeah, I can see where that difficulty. The unit cohesion thing has been  
2 studied now, ever since that war and it has its positives and negatives, but overall, it's a  
3 positive.

4           TN: Oh, a huge positive! I mean—

5           JM: Because the units that came in after that, that went to replacements, suffered  
6 so much because nobody cared about anybody else, they were all in it themselves. That's  
7 a blanket statement and I shouldn't make it that way, but you and I know both know what  
8 we're talking about here.

9           TN: Yeah. I don't even know my background beyond this thing, but I've spent the  
10 major portion of my career, when I was not commanding, I was studying leadership or  
11 teaching leadership or revising army leadership. The issues of cohesion and how you lead  
12 soldiers and all that is close and dear to my heart.

13          JM: You're a psychologist too, right?

14          TN: Right. I lectured at West Point, lectured at the Army War College, I have in  
15 the past, anyway. Everything from ROTC to battalions, to infantry battalions. In  
16 Germany, I have this presentation I give which is called, "Leadership in Combat and  
17 Small Unit Operations" because I talk about rifle companies and the experience of a  
18 soldier when he first goes into combat and the psychology of being in combat. What do  
19 they expect from the leader and how does the leader respond and all that.

20          JM: Let's talk a little bit about when Taft goes down. The leadership of that  
21 platoon falls to the platoon sergeant.

22          TN: Sergeant Nathan.

23          JM: Was it evident to you that that worked the way it's supposed to, that it's the  
24 next man takes over?

25          TN: Yeah, yeah, I did. I lost all three platoon leaders that day. Only one killed,  
26 but two were wounded and I lost my forward observer, we'll get to it later. There wasn't  
27 a discernable change, that I could tell. However, it's important for people to understand  
28 that as a company commander, I was so busy that I wasn't observing a hell of a lot of  
29 what the enemy was coming from, where the artillery was landing, what I was supposed  
30 to do with maintaining contact with B Company, all that. I've often said it is easier to  
31 become a company commander than it is to be a PFC (Private First Class) because the

1 company commander is so involved, so mentally occupied, that in my case I can honestly  
2 say that I did not feel much fear. The reason for it is that I didn't have space in my head  
3 for it.

4 JM: Too much on your mind?

5 TN: Too much on my mind. The solider sitting there, laying on the grass, waiting  
6 for someone to tell him what to do.

7 JM: They also know that when we looked back on the war now, company  
8 commanders, captains at least as a rank, suffered the greatest percentage of casualties as a  
9 percentage of how many were there of any other rank.

10 TN: I didn't know that.

11 JM: Now, you can take into account that there were some that were killed in  
12 choppers crashing and everything else, but company commanders suffered as a  
13 percentage greater than any other rank.

14 TN: I can see that because you're trying to move around. You're going to check  
15 your platoon here and there. Everyone else is hunkered down and the company  
16 commander that is doing his job is getting around.

17 JM: It was a company war; it was a company-sized unit war more so than it was a  
18 battalion or brigade, as it was in World War II. You've lost all three of your platoon  
19 leaders over a two-day period?

20 TN: Yeah.

21 JM: One killed, two wounded I believe?

22 TN: Actually, in the first afternoon. I don't know how you want to do the  
23 interview—

24 JM: No, you go right ahead.

25 TN: We land, the platoons are engaged. B Company has moved forward to start  
26 carrying out their mission and so I have—the 3<sup>rd</sup> Platoon is here, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Platoon and the  
27 1<sup>st</sup> Platoon. The enemy is coming out of this creek bed. This platoon, the 1<sup>st</sup> platoon holds  
28 that juncture right there, and so the enemy turns and starts running right in front of my 2<sup>nd</sup>  
29 and 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon, partially in front of B Company. For a period of about an hour, we kill a  
30 lot of them. It's like they were disoriented as to where the enemy fire was coming from or  
31 something because they keep coming down the mountain and sort of in front of these two

1 platoons and the platoons do a lot of damage to the enemy. At that point, there's not  
2 many casualties. The casualties are primarily in the left flank, 3<sup>rd</sup> platoon.

3 JM: Could you tell by the wounds of your three platoon leaders, as to whether  
4 they had been targeted?

5 TN: I never saw them. They were hit and they were sent back to the battalion aid  
6 station.

7 JM: Before you had a chance. The reason I ask is, again in reading the Colonel's  
8 after action report, he talks about seeing a lot of men who appeared to have been targeted  
9 in the sense of, and I think he was talking about NCOs the stripes on the sleeves, the  
10 bright yellow stripes as opposed to the camo which they put later on, and I wondered if  
11 there was any evidence in your company.

12 TN: I think what happened, and to some degree was my mistake, I had given the  
13 lieutenants a pep talk before the battle and I said, "You know, your job is to lead. My job  
14 is to lead." I think the lieutenants got shot because they were up front. You know, Joe  
15 Marm got shot winning a Medal of Honor charging across an open field. I think the same  
16 thing happened to the other two. I think Lieutenant Taft got shot because he was in the  
17 front of his platoon.

18 JM: All three of the platoon leaders had trained at Benning?

19 TN: Right.

20 JM: So you were the only one of the officers that was sort of new to it. Whatever  
21 they did, they also did it because they have learned it in training?

22 TN: Sure. Yeah.

23 JM: It makes sense to me just observing it. Let's talk a little bit about—you've  
24 lost all of your leaders, now you have—you're going to be on the ground for two more  
25 days at X-Ray correct? The extraction from X-Ray, after its all over, did that go as  
26 planned so to speak? Were you extracted in an orderly manner? Because you had  
27 essentially won the battle. Is that correct?

28 TN: Yeah. With that—brought us on Chinooks, CH-47s and we landed back at  
29 Pleiku.

30 JM: What percentage of your troops were killed or wounded? Thinking this only  
31 in military effectiveness point of view.

1           TN: Well, eighteen killed and twenty-seven wounded out of about seventy-six, I  
2 think.

3           JM: So over fifty percent killed or wounded. Did you stand down? Did your unit  
4 stand down then? Your company?

5           TN: Not immediately, we went back to Pleiku and then we were put in a defense  
6 position guarding an airfield and a brigade headquarters. A few days later we went back  
7 to An Khe and stood down for a just a short time. Never let infantry stand down for very  
8 long.

9           JM: Let me ask you a couple of equipment questions. The M16 was being tested  
10 for the first time in sustain combat. How did it perform in your units?

11          TN: One of the things I insisted on was that the soldiers cleaned their rifle every  
12 day. I had—I knew what the problem with the M16 was. I was carving deposits in the—I  
13 forget the technical name now, but the little tube that comes from the bolt. It would get  
14 carboned up and then when the bolt came forward, it would jam. My requirement through  
15 the chain of command was we cleaned the rifles every day and cleaned that thing out. I  
16 do not recall that we had people complaining about the rifle jamming. It may have  
17 happened to some, but it didn't become—

18          JM: It was not an issue in the battle?

19          TN: I'm not aware of it, if it was.

20          JM: How about—this was also one of the first times that we got to think about  
21 what I like to call, "Platoon artillery" or the organic artillery of a M79. Did your  
22 grenadiers—

23          TN: Wonderful weapon.

24          JM: Wonderful Weapon?

25          TN: That's right.

26          JM: Shooting it into the trees because there were NVA in the trees?

27          TN: Yup.

28          JM: How about the confidence of the grenadier with that weapon? Did you feel  
29 that they knew what to do with it and that they liked carrying it?

30          TN: It wasn't an issue because we hadn't experienced any heavy combat before. I  
31 think they were confident with it, everyone liked to see that little thing, you could watch

1 it out there and go boom! Explode and make a big noise. We all liked it; I think they liked  
2 it. I think as war evolved, a lot of them wanted to carry a M16 also because of the rain.  
3 Eventually, the army came up with the M16 combination.

4 JM: Well, they also came up with, essentially, a shot gun shell for that first round,  
5 if you were on patrol. So you had a little more—you could defend yourself at least on that  
6 first shot. What about your cruiser, what about the M60?

7 TN: It worked fine. I mean, we didn't have—again, I'm not aware of any  
8 grievances with the M60 machine guns.

9 JM: The LAWs (Light Anti-Tank Weapon)? We were testing those for one of the  
10 first times too.

11 TN: Yeah, we carried a couple per platoon and Joe Marm, that was the way he  
12 started his charge across the open clearing to get a machine behind an ant hill, he shot a  
13 LAW into the anthill. It worked. As far as I know that was the only—there just wasn't a  
14 target for LAWs.

15 JM: I ask these questions about weapons because you guys were the laboratory  
16 for—

17 TN: Later on, the Marines used to bitch like hell about the M16. My response was  
18 that's because they don't clean their rifles, because we didn't have a lot of problems with  
19 them. We had problems with other things, like medevac and so forth. The biggest  
20 problem I had in the battlefield was that before the major assault—in that afternoon,  
21 when Hal Moore told B Company and I to go get that lost platoon, I could not get  
22 artillery fire to fire prep for me because at the time, we only had one artillery fire control  
23 net. Only one FO from the various companies could be directing artillery at one time. B  
24 Company had a very good FO, raiding that early. Whenever it came time for us to  
25 assault, I couldn't get through to get a prep-fire. So I used my mortars and they didn't  
26 have much ammunition. They ran out of ammo very rapidly, so my biggest problem was  
27 that.

28 JM: You were trying to bring in 105s?

29 TN: 105s.

30 JM: How difficult was it to identify your own positions when you were calling

31 ARA?

1           TN: We just used red smoke.

2           JM: You used smoke. So your troops were carrying smoke grenades that you just  
3 get on the radio and say identify and you let them—then you had an aerial FO?

4           TN: We had an Air Force vac on the ground but also, there were Air Force vacs in  
5 the air. We had for the army helicopters, it was just radio contact with the choppers, with  
6 the flight leaders.

7           JM: Well, Tony I'm out of time.

8           TN: That's a shame, because I haven't gotten to tell you what I think.

9           JM: Tell me what you think, here's what I'd like to say about this interview. First  
10 of all, Texas Tech University, as you know, is the largest archive in the world on the  
11 Vietnam War. We do these very long, extensive interviews with people and I would love  
12 to have your interview, that we can put on the record. I don't care if takes sixteen hours,  
13 and we've got some of those. But it's very important to us because you're such a pivotal  
14 person in this battle and with your men, and I would do anything that we can to either get  
15 you out there to Lubbock, to do it in person with one of our oral historians or we can do it  
16 telephonically, whatever. But your interview is one that we would very much would like  
17 to have as part of it and I know there's so much more to say.

18          TN: Yeah, I'd like to do that, and I would be willing to go out to Lubbock to do it  
19 because I have a lot to say about the issue of a soldier's response and there's a lot of  
20 leadership lessons I learned in that battlefield. Things for young lieutenants that they need  
21 to know, which the army never taught me. It's funny but I've learned so much. I left there  
22 and went to graduate school. I was so disappointed after graduate school, taking a lot of  
23 social-psych courses, about the stuff in the textbooks that the soldier psychologists were  
24 using. It came from army experiences about behavior and stress and all this.

25          JM: Right.

26          TN: When I came out of Vietnam, I thought I had this covered wisdom, you  
27 know, about battle and soldiers and everything, most of it was in those books. But no one  
28 had ever steered me in that direction. I think and still as far as I know, in army—

29          JM: I know West Point made an effort during that time to start teaching the  
30 humanities, start teaching some things that were not just engineering.

1           TN: Well no, I taught there, I taught in that department. The department of  
2 behavioral sciences and leadership. When I came—when I finished graduate school,  
3 that's where I went for three years. To teach up there. Again, I've a lot of time to think  
4 and study, and I must've read more about small unit combat in the last thirty years than  
5 any other human being. I like to think that I have stuff stored in my head that is useful.  
6 Plus, experiences of LZ X-Ray that we haven't even started to cover yet.

7           JM: Well, that's for sure and I want to do that. In addition, I also teach military  
8 history and the Vietnam War at Texas Tech University, so if we get you out there for an  
9 interview, I'll get you in on the a lecture circuit and we'll get you into my classroom.

10          TN: I would love to do that.

11          JM: You're a person that we need to tap those resources because this is such a  
12 pivotal part of this battle and I don't know if anyone had more a pivotal part than you did  
13 in it. I would like to go on and on and on. In fact, I'm not a professional oral historian, I'm  
14 a professor but at the same time, I may ask for this interview myself so we can continue  
15 again—

16          TN: I'd like to do it.

17          JM: Thank you very much for your time, I enjoyed it and we appreciate  
18 everything that you said.

19 (End of Interview.)