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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with William Cameron
Conducted by Kelly Crager
July 2, 2008
Transcribed by Cecily Darwin**

1 Kelly Crager: This is Kelly Crager conducting an oral history interview with Mr.
2 William Cameron. Today is 2 July 2008. I am at the Special Collections Library
3 interview room on the campus of Texas Tech University. Mr. Cameron is kind enough to
4 join us from Stoneham, Massachusetts. Good morning Mr. Cameron.

5 William Cameron: Good morning.

6 KC: To begin this interview, Mr. Cameron, could you give me a little
7 biographical information? When were you born and where?

8 WC: 22 November '45, Boston, Massachusetts.

9 KC: What were your parent's names?

10 WC: William and Alma, A-L-M-A.

11 KC: Very good. How many brothers and sisters did you have, Mr. Cameron?

12 WC: Two brothers, two sisters.

13 KC: Where were you in the progression?

14 WC: First.

15 KC: You were the eldest then, okay.

16 WC: Yes.

17 KC: Where did you go to school?

18 WC: Medford High, graduated 1963.

19 KC: 1963. What sort of things did you like to do in high school? What were your
20 strengths?

21 WC: My strengths, oh, academics and sports.

1 KC: What kind of academics especially?
2 WC: Especially English and history. I hated math.
3 KC: I can relate to that. What kind of sports were you interested in?
4 WC: Hockey and baseball and then they made us play soccer, too, which I hated.
5 KC: How would you describe your childhood, Mr. Cameron?
6 WC: A normal, middle class kid growing up in the Boston area.
7 KC: Very good. So you graduated high school in 1963. What did you hope to do
8 once you graduated high school? Did you have any plans?
9 WC: Teach and coach.
10 KC: I am sorry.
11 WC: Teach English and history and coach.
12 KC: In the Massachusetts area, I guess.
13 WC: Pardon me?
14 KC: In the Medford, Massachusetts area?
15 WC: Yes, in the Massachusetts area.
16 KC: Very good. Now when you graduated high school how aware were you of
17 what was going on, the United States foreign policies especially as it concerned Southeast
18 Asia and Vietnam?
19 WC: Very ignorant. The most—naturally we were growing up with the ideas of
20 Kennedy, but as far as Vietnam, no idea.
21 KC: Now being from Massachusetts and from the Boston area what was your
22 opinion as a young adult of John Kennedy?
23 WC: Oh, he was an idol. Naturally he was a Roman Catholic and being brought
24 up as a Roman Catholic in those days, a practicing good Catholic, you believed God, the
25 country, the whole stereotypical gamut. That was me.
26 KC: Okay. Now what did you do after high school? Did you enter college?
27 WC: Yep.
28 KC: Where did you start college?
29 WC: BC.
30 KC: At Boston College.
31 WC: Yep.

1 KC: Okay, very good. I guess you were trying to follow the English, history—
2 WC: Exactly, liberal arts.
3 KC: Liberal arts and, of course, you plan on going into coaching. Were you able
4 to finish your degree there?
5 WC: Nope. I lasted one year. I took a year off and I dutifully notified the
6 Medford draft board and in October I was drafted.
7 KC: Why did you just go the one year?
8 WC: Uh, financial problems.
9 KC: Sure, sure. Now you dutifully notified the draft board. That must've been an
10 uncomfortable experience.
11 WC: You know you have to, you know.
12 KC: Sure, sure. That must've been—
13 WC: In those days, please. Yeah, I did.
14 KC: So was it with a sense of dread that you notified them?
15 WC: No. It still didn't dawn on me that there was a war going on and it was still
16 early in the war. What was that, '64 I believe. Yeah, it had to be '64 because I was
17 drafted in '65, in October of '65, yep.
18 KC: Okay. So in 1964, of course, the United States is still limited in its
19 involvement in Vietnam, but then again in 1965, in the spring of 1965, things begin to
20 heat up in Vietnam. So were you following this with much interest considering that—?
21 WC: No.
22 KC: You still were not following it?
23 WC: No.
24 KC: Okay. So you get drafted in the fall of 1965 in the U.S. Army. Tell me
25 what's going through your mind as an eighteen-, nineteen-year-old young man when you
26 get your draft notice?
27 WC: I just figured, okay, here I go. You have to go. Canada wasn't an option, put
28 it that way.
29 KC: Sure, sure.
30 WC: The father being the Navy veteran from World War II, the upbringing, my
31 mother saying the rosary when I'm gone, but you know, Ft. Dix here I come.

1 KC: So I guess your place of basic training was at Ft. Dix, New Jersey, then.
2 WC: Yes, it was.
3 KC: Explain to me how you faired in basic training.
4 WC: Oh, let's see. You do what you have to do. You follow your orders. You
5 just shut your mouth. You don't volunteer for anything and you get along.
6 KC: Was there any specific instances in basic training that stand out to you over
7 any others?
8 WC: Yeah. I showed up with short hair and they went nuts, you know.
9 KC: Now why was that the case? Explain that to me.
10 WC: Really? Oh, this is a riot. You put on a pair of shirt and clothes and you go
11 to basic and they yank you off a bus and all of a sudden some DI (drill instructor) comes
12 running up to you and says, "Oooh," you know screaming, yelling, the whole bit. He
13 says, "You, you. How come you have short hair?" I said, "I've always had short hair all
14 my life." So he says prove it to me. Big mistake, reach into my wallet and I have a picture
15 of myself with short hair. So aww, you know, the usual crap. "Oh, look it. He loves
16 himself. He carries his picture." So from that day on I knew, okay, idiot. Shut your mouth
17 and just go along with the program. That was the only thing that stood out. Naturally you
18 learn how to fire a weapon, you know, stuff like that, how to march, big deal.
19 KC: So it doesn't sound like it was a—or at least looking back on it, it doesn't
20 sound like it was a massive change for you. It was nothing that was traumatic to you in
21 any way shape or form.
22 WC: No, I was in shape.
23 KC: Sure. So at this time did you—this is still in '65, again, before the buildup.
24 Did you have any inkling you may be sent to Vietnam or go somewhere else?
25 WC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. From the first day you step off the bus.
26 KC: Now how did you know that?
27 WC: Oh, they start screaming, "You're going to Vietnam." I said, "Okay, let me
28 start doing some reading now, a little research here. What's Vietnam?"
29 KC: So they made it pretty clear to you early on.
30 WC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

1 KC: Yes, indeed. All right. Well, after basic training where did you go for
2 advanced training?

3 WC: I stayed at Ft., what do you call it, Ft. Dix and believe it or not they made
4 me a truck mechanic.

5 KC: Any particular reason why?

6 WC: To this day—that’s why I’m doing all this research, how do they figure out
7 what your MOS (military occupational specialty) is. You know, they offered OCS
8 (officer candidate school) to me and all that stuff. I said, “No, thank you. Two and out is
9 what I want.”

10 KC: Sure. Now why did they offer OCS?

11 WC: I guess when you take all of your exams and all that stuff. There was about
12 four of us they pulled out and the captain said, “Whatever you do you want to go to
13 officers training school?” I said, “Nope.”

14 KC: Do you think your college background had anything to do with that?

15 WC: Oh, did I ever hear about that? Yeah, once in basic, yeah. Until they knew
16 they—okay, college boy, do this and you know boom, boom. Then they laid off after they
17 knew you shut your mouth and did what you’re supposed to.

18 KC: Right, right. So you say you just wanted to do the two and out and to be
19 finished.

20 WC: You got it.

21 KC: There must’ve been, I would think, some temptation for officer’s candidate
22 school just based on—

23 WC: Nope.

24 KC: Nothing whatsoever.

25 WC: No, no, believe me no, nope.

26 KC: You seemed to be very sure in that you did not want to enter any sort of a
27 more permanent station in the military. Any reason why particularly?

28 WC: You know what, I could say now I know why, but back then when I was
29 nineteen I had half a brain and I said, “Let me go here. This is some part of my life I’ve
30 got to”—I never thought people would be shooting at me and trying to blow me up. I just

1 figured, “Okay, I’m going to go over there.” I probably figured to be a clerk or something
2 like that. No, I just, I knew I had to do two years and that was it hopefully.

3 KC: Well, take me through a typical day here at Ft. Dix in advanced training.

4 WC: At the wheeled vehicle, what, for the mechanics?

5 KC: Yes, yes.

6 WC: Ah, it was marked different from basic because now all of a sudden they
7 mentioned Vietnam, but they say you’re going to be fixing trucks. I’m saying to myself,
8 “What the hell am I doing here?” because I didn’t know a wrench from a baseball bat.
9 But it was still naturally still regimented and oriented, but they weren’t as, how can I say
10 it, trying to break you down and build you up again. They were trying to educate you I
11 guess is what I’m trying to say.

12 KC: Sure, sure. Now what kind of training, and be as specific as you would like
13 here, did you receive here at the wheeled vehicle training?

14 WC: I don’t know. They taught me how to fix trucks and, you know. I mean, I’m
15 not going to lie. I wasn’t a hundred percent into it. I said, “This is a joke,” but I did what I
16 had to do to pass, but everybody passes anyway. You just help the kid. You shine your
17 boots and you go to formations. You went to class. I believe it was like—it was almost
18 like an eight-to-five job. Let’s see. Anything else outstanding—I made some friends and
19 that was about it.

20 KC: All right. Well, where did you go after advanced training?

21 WC: Lovely Ft. Benning, Georgia.

22 KC: That must’ve been a change for a New Englander.

23 WC: Yeah, it wasn’t bad, though, believe it or not, except for what they wanted
24 me for an MOS. They wanted me to be now a tank mechanic. I’m saying, “You people
25 are crazy,” but, hey, this is what they want.”

26 KC: I think I already I know the answer to this question, but I’m going to ask it
27 anyway.

28 WC: Go ahead.

29 KC: Why did they choose you for tank mechanic?

30 WC: That is the million dollar question, Kyle, I would love to know. I have a
31 vague, vague idea why because when I left BC I went to work for—my uncle was like a

1 parts foreman at International Harvester Company and I worked in the parts department
2 driving a truck, big deal. That's the only reason I could come up with why the military
3 ever thought of me to go to fix trucks and tanks.

4 KC: How much different was the tank mechanic training for you?

5 WC: Ah, that was beautiful. It was laid back and they really wanted to instruct
6 you. I thought Ft. Benning was nice, plus it exposed me. Actually not to sound corny or
7 anything, to multi-racial, just the different form of living and to booze.

8 KC: It sounds like it was a pretty beneficial, pretty positive experience for you
9 here.

10 WC: Oh, gosh, I'd never knock it. No, I wouldn't. The instructors were very nice.
11 They weren't yelling and screaming at you. The barracks you lived in was very nice and
12 clean. I don't know if you know Ft. Benning, but it was right at the jump towers there.
13 You saw those poor kids coming off the towers and coming up with their parachutes and
14 all that happy stuff.

15 KC: Probably feeling pretty lucky that you're in tank training.

16 WC: Oh, yeah, like everybody's saying I want to go to jump school. I said, "Unh-
17 unh, not me, not me."

18 KC: How different was tank training from the wheeled vehicle training?

19 WC: Bigger rear goals. It was much more intense, but as long as you had the
20 basic understanding on what to do, what does the generator do, what does changing
21 tracks do, simple stuff like, that simple repairs, but they were much more—how could I
22 say it? They were more dedicated to your training. They really were. I give them credit
23 for that.

24 KC: Sure, sure. It sounded like you did pretty well in your mechanics training.

25 WC: You know, I still to this day I will not touch a vehicle, but go ahead.

26 KC: How long were you here at Ft. Benning?

27 WC: I believe nine weeks.

28 KC: Nine weeks training there.

29 WC: Yeah, yeah.

30 KC: What were you going to do when your training was over? Did you still—?

31 WC: No idea.

1 KC: Didn't know, still didn't know. Did you have any inkling that Vietnam may
2 have been the future?

3 WC: Yeah, I figured, okay, here I am. I'm going to go to somewhere near. My
4 limited ability there was Saigon and all. They probably have me fixing jeeps, whatever.
5 Then again with tanks I said, "Oops, wait a minute. Now they've got me fixing tanks. I
6 might be close to where they shoot at you."

7 KC: Right, right. All right. Well, you finished there at Ft. Bliss. When do you
8 receive your orders for Vietnam?

9 WC: Three days after we graduated.

10 KC: What's going through your mind? You suspect that the entire time, but now
11 it's happening. What's going through your mind?

12 WC: Oh, yeah, game time. It's real.

13 KC: Yeah. You said you did a little research to try to figure out a little bit more
14 about Vietnam.

15 WC: Yes. What I do is I love to read anyways. So I would always grab *The New*
16 *York Times* and see what they had to say if I could find one on post. I'd hit a library. Back
17 in those days it was tough, but I look up where Vietnam, what it was, did a little reading
18 backwards. I went all the way—see, I'm trying to see it because I know I did a lot of
19 research when I came out, but just basically what was going on is what I tried to educate
20 myself on.

21 KC: Okay. In that research what were you finding as a nineteen-, twenty-year-old
22 man?

23 WC: I'm saying, "Okay, people are getting killed." I started changing as I read a
24 little because I still was a practicing Catholic in those days. I found out that they had shall
25 we say a little involvement in the development of Southeast Asia. I said, "Wait a minute."
26 My mind started saying, "There's a little politics involved here," but not much. Nothing
27 crazy, you know what I mean. I'm saying, "Okay, I think I'm saying, 'Is this a civil war
28 or not.'" I'm saying, "What the hell are we doing there?" To this day I said, "No, I have
29 to do it." I was still brought up in the World War II ideals and Korea. You had to do what
30 your country said for you. There was a little minute demonstrations. You'll see little clips
31 like people at Harvard demonstrating, but just little stuff and I'm saying, "Hmm, this is

1 new to me.” It wasn’t earth shattering yet. Put it this way, not bragging, I knew a little bit
2 more than the common poor kid that was, shall we say, in training with me. But it wasn’t
3 a big topic of discussion. You talked to, say, maybe, no, no, now I’m getting into Ft.
4 Bliss. I would say at Georgia, some instructors would say “Brace yourself. It isn’t all
5 roses and peaches and you could be doing stuff under fire.” It wasn’t like in basic and the
6 first advanced infantry where they’d say, “Now you’ve got to do this because we’re
7 fighting for democracy,” and all this happy shit. At Benning they tried to make it
8 professional, I guess is what I’m trying to say. I just kept reading—you know not that I
9 spent—I’d say out of a week I probably spent three or four hours doing reading toward
10 that. I would be more involved in the sports page. I’m not going to lie to you. I still
11 wanted to know what the hell I was getting into.

12 KC: Sure. Now, as you watch American involvement in there as you’re doing
13 this research, as you watch it grow from the end of World War II to what it was
14 becoming in 1965, what did you think of the general flow of American policy?

15 WC: I thought it was all for the best. By the best I mean at the present time. Here
16 we’re fighting communism, plain and simple, but I started wavering a little in Benning. I
17 really started wavering.

18 KC: What was it that you were finding in your research that led you to waver?

19 WC: Why are we going over there? Nobody was invaded. Why is the church
20 involved? Why at the time is Johnson trying to build up troops? For what reason, for
21 what goal are we trying to achieve here?

22 KC: All right. Now, at Ft. Benning apparently, then, you ran into individuals,
23 most likely instructors I would guess, who had been to Vietnam, is that true?

24 WC: Yes.

25 KC: Okay. What kind of things were they telling you? You say it’s for real and
26 it’s more business-like, but what sort of image were they projecting to you about what
27 was going on over there and your potential role in it?

28 WC: Do your job as best you can, but do it with a wary eye and always protect
29 the person with you. The other thing, though, the negative part, though, that I was never
30 really, to this day—now I understand why, but they would never refer to them as an

1 Asian or an enemy. They would always say a gook, a gook. That's what really pissed me
2 off.

3 KC: Okay. Why did it anger you?

4 WC: Because here I grew up in a white middle-class society. You never even
5 used the N-word. I had seen two blacks, I think, before I get into the Army except in
6 sports, really.

7 KC: So why do you think that the military referred to them in this way rather
8 than—

9 WC: Now I don't know—I doubt I knew it at this time, but now with all my
10 maturing, as I would say, I think they were trying to dehumanize an enemy so it would be
11 easy for you to say, "Hey, this guy is bad. Take him out."

12 KC: Right, right. You depersonalize them and it makes it easier to do the job, I
13 guess.

14 WC: I believe all—I know now that was their reason, well, one of their reasons, I
15 guess.

16 KC: Sure. All right, now you have a little bit of time between when you get your
17 orders to move out and before you actually have to go to the West Coast, I guess, at
18 probably Ft. or out to Travis in California.

19 WC: Oh, yeah. Well, they sent me from Benning to Ft. Happiness as I call it, Ft.
20 Bliss.

21 KC: Oh, okay. You went to Ft. Bliss first in El Paso.

22 WC: Yeah. It was a new battalion forming up. So, you know—what did I do? No,
23 they didn't take the train there. They flew me. Luckily I had two buddies that I had met
24 from Massachusetts and they were going the same place as me. So we went home on
25 leave and then I believe seven days later I was at Ft. Bliss. It was a horror show.

26 KC: Yeah. I was going to say that for a good New England boy like yourself
27 moving out to El Paso out to Ft. Bliss that must've been quite a change for you.

28 WC: Oh, I loved El Paso. I just hated what the Army did there. Juarez, Mexico,
29 everybody needs to mature in Juarez, Mexico, you know. I was better. One thing I have
30 to say, too, about Georgia too, I got one of my lifetime goals. I got to an Alabama

1 football game. Yeah, that was one of my goals in life. I always wanted to see where Joe
2 Namath played.

3 KC: Oh, yeah. I bet so.

4 WC: We luckily somehow there was a kid in our class that was from
5 Birmingham. He got us tickets and we took the trip up there. I saw a—well, it was a
6 practice game, a spring practice just before. I got to see an Alabama game.

7 KC: Yeah, that's a whole new religion in Alabama.

8 WC: Oh, oh, I had always, you know—well, I'm a big football fan anyway,
9 Southeast Conference ranks supreme over all, but anyway I got to see that. Anyway,
10 getting back to Bliss, it was a circus. Nobody knew what they were doing, nobody.

11 KC: Explain that to me a little bit.

12 WC: We get off a plane and it took us two days to finally get off because when
13 we got to Bliss nobody knew who we were or what we were. "Oh, yeah. You're that new
14 battalion. Just sit here and wait." So we waited for three days. Some lieutenant came and
15 picked us up in a deuce-and-a-half and he started, "You guys are going to Vietnam.
16 We're a good troop"—you know the whole riga-maroo. This kid was just out of OCS,
17 too. I think he was like a year older than me. I said, "Okay," grin and bear it. They took
18 us out there and I saw this tank I had never seen in my life before.

19 KC: Which tank was it? Do you remember?

20 WC: Yeah, M-42 A-1 Duster.

21 KC: Okay, right, the Duster.

22 WC: Yeah. Then there were these quad-fifties on the back of deuce-and-a-halves
23 and searchlight jeeps. I said, "Hmm, this is an experience." Then it was like going
24 through basic all over again. I was, believe it or not, I was lucky to the extent of I think I
25 was twenty, yeah, I must've been twenty. Yeah, I was twenty at the time. All these other
26 kids were just out of basic, just out of basic. So basically I was a little privileged because
27 I was a little older and had been in the Army, say, what four months more than mostly
28 everybody else. Then for the first two months we were just forming up. They broke us
29 down to batteries and I had to go learn—naturally had to learn about this new tank that
30 drove us nuts. They had taken it out of mothballs from the National Guard. They trained
31 us shooting down airplanes in the Nevada desert, ah, the New Mexico desert.

1 KC: You were also training on weapons, as well, rather than just mechanics.

2 WC: Oh, yeah. Oh, you better believe it. That tanks breaks down and I'm in the
3 middle of nowhere I want to know how to drive it, shoot it, the whole bit.

4 KC: Sure, sure. Well, what did you think about this? I would think as a twenty
5 year old this would've been quite an experience tooling around the desert out there.

6 WC: Not really, no. I don't want to sound lackadaisical about it, but it was,
7 "Okay. Let's learn this if you're going to go somewhere." I'm wondering, "Shooting
8 down airplanes? What in the name of Christ?" I knew there were no airplanes. But then
9 they said, "Well, we maybe guarding the airbases." Oh, okay, fine. That's nice. You go to
10 Da Nang, there's a beautiful Air Force base. You go to Saigon there's a nice Air Force
11 base. I figured I was still safe.

12 KC: Sure, sure. Now, you're training there at Ft. Bliss and you're going to
13 Vietnam. Those are two drastically different geographically in terms of climate and
14 everything, what do you think about this?

15 WC: I think, well, now you'll get me rolling. I think the Army doesn't know
16 what they're doing and even at twenty years old I said, "What in the name of God? Why
17 aren't they training us like everybody down in Ft. Polk or something like that?" But the
18 Army in its infinite wisdom they said, "No, you're going to shoot down airplanes." Not
19 until our last day did they teach us how to break into herringbone formation and guarding
20 convoys and that. Believe it or not, I had one day training on Vietnam.

21 KC: I gather you weren't all that confident in the training you received for where
22 you were going.

23 WC: No. Believe it or not, we had, well, two good officers. We had an excellent
24 captain, who to this day I'd love to see again, and a lieutenant that had just come out as
25 an E-5. He said he was making it a lifetime career. He said, "Gentlemen, just learn what
26 you have to do because we're going to the real stuff." You say, "Lieutenant Roe, what the
27 hell are they teaching us there for?" He says, "I don't know, just learn how to use this
28 stuff."

29 KC: What kind of weapons were you training on there?

30 WC: Everything from an M-14—we never saw an M-16 until July in Vietnam,
31 M-50, M-60, now see the 40-millimeter tanks. What the hell else? Agrenade launcher,

1 stuff like that. But it really wasn't much. They geared—I forget how long I was in Bliss
2 maybe six, seven, eight months. I don't know, but we didn't really get to any infantry
3 type tactics until like the week before we were going home to go on leave and then come
4 back to get on the ship.

5 KC: So you had leave for how long after Bliss?

6 WC: Fourteen days.

7 KC: Fourteen days, and you go back home to Massachusetts?

8 WC: Yep.

9 KC: What did you do knowing that you're going to Vietnam?

10 WC: Drank.

11 KC: A lot, I would assume.

12 WC: Yep. I still hadn't smoked, though.

13 KC: What about your family and friends?

14 WC: Oh, my mother was saying rosaries, novenas, praying. My father, he just
15 said, "Do what you have to do, but you have to go." I said, "Dad, I'm going. Don't worry
16 about it. Behave yourself." Then all my other buddies, actually all of them, they were all
17 still in college. The night before I went back we had one hell of a—and my wife also, she
18 was my girlfriend at the time, God bless her. She's been married to me for what? Jesus,
19 forty years now. She didn't go out with us the last night, but I spent some time with her. I
20 played hockey when I was home, just goof around drink and what every normal kid does,
21 I guess. It was funny, too, because I had to use a phony ID.

22 KC: That doesn't hardly seem fair, does it?

23 WC: Well, that's why I chuckle when I think of some of the stupid laws, but hey,
24 whatever.

25 KC: Exactly. Okay. Well, as a twenty year old and knowing you're going to
26 Vietnam it sounds like you still weren't taking this as seriously as maybe someone might
27 have in 1968, 1969.

28 WC: No, no. I knew there was a possibility of death, but at twenty years old I'm
29 not dying.

30 KC: Sure. You're invincible at twenty.

31 WC: You got it.

1 KC: That's why we fight wars with twenty year olds.

2 WC: Oh, please, exactly, amen. That's why there's no more draft, too.

3 KC: After your fourteen-day leave I guess did you fly back to California?

4 WC: No. We went to Bliss. We went back to Bliss. Then they packed us all up
5 for I believe it was a couple of days, just checking everything, making sure all the
6 equipment was secure, making sure the tanks, making sure the trucks were all set. They
7 flew us all out to I believe it was Oakland and then we went into Travis. There was a little
8 demonstration there, but then they took us down to Oakland and we boarded this old ship.
9 The lovely USNS (United States Naval Ship) *Geiger* which, believe it or not, went to the
10 Massachusetts Maritime Academy. I happen to get onboard it because we have a cottage
11 down there. I said, "This ship looks familiar." Then I read the history on it and, sure
12 enough, it was the old ship that I had gone to Vietnam on. My kids thought that was a
13 big, you know, whoop.

14 KC: You say there were some demonstrations there in Oakland. What kind of
15 demonstrations?

16 WC: Just signs, you know, "Stop the war." I distinctly remember it. The long
17 haired, quote, "hippie," college student, stop the war. But nothing big. It was just in the
18 papers as you read in the papers. There was a lot of college demonstrations. I believe
19 New York had had one at the time, but I'm not sure. Okay, time for a nice boat ride.

20 KC: What did you think of these protests and the protestors at this time?

21 WC: It didn't faze me in the least. That was just my outlook on it, everybody has
22 their own opinion. As long as there is no violence then go ahead, do your thing.

23 KC: All right. Now, when you left Bliss did you leave with the equipment you'll
24 be taking with you?

25 WC: Some of it, some of it went to Galveston. Some of it was on the *Geiger* with
26 us. Naturally, we had our duffle bags and our rifles and machineguns.

27 KC: Right, right, right. Describe that trip to Vietnam.

28 WC: Other than getting dysentery and turning twenty-one in the middle of the
29 Pacific Ocean it was uneventful. You know, play cards, do a lot of reading, watch
30 movies, go out to the back and do physical exercises on the back deck. That was about it.

1 Nothing outstanding. They kept drilling in your head you're going to Vietnam. I knew I
2 was going to war and that was it.

3 KC: What were you and your comrades talking about on the trip over?

4 WC: This sucks, the boat, you know, the trip. Let me see what else, talk about—
5 well, one of my buddies had got married and a lot of us went to the wedding. We talked
6 about that. That got us through about two days. I remember we listened to a Michigan
7 State-Notre Dame game, that infamous tie. That stayed in my mind. I had my twenty-one
8 year-old day birthday. They made a little cake with a candy for it. That was about it,
9 seriously. You do your PT (physical training). You can only do so much PT and fire your
10 weapons so many times off the back deck or the fan tail or whatever the hell they call it.
11 That was it.

12 KC: No talk about the reservations any of you may have had?

13 WC: I guess so, yeah. I would guess so, yeah. Geez, I'm trying to think back.
14 Yeah, there was a little—there was apprehension. Don't get me wrong, but nobody
15 thought they were going to die.

16 KC: Now, did you stop in Japan first or was it straight into Vietnam?

17 WC: One day in Okinawa.

18 KC: One day in Okinawa.

19 WC: Naha, Okinawa. It was the worst day of my life just about.

20 KC: Explain that to me.

21 WC: Just the impoverished conditions and the beggars and the prostitutes. It was
22 awful, to be perfectly honest. It was my first, not my last, but my first rude awakening
23 about what life was really like.

24 KC: Can you provide any more detail on that? That sounds like that had quite an
25 impact on you.

26 WC: Oh, it had an impact on me. Well, as soon as we get off the boat naturally
27 you're crazy and you want to go get drunk somewhere and do whatever. But as soon as
28 you get off the boat there was beggars and there was an acrid, stinky old urine smell as
29 soon as you get off the boat. Then we went downtown and those little pedi cabs and
30 naturally hit the bars and walk around. Like a fool I still went to—I made a visit to
31 church. I should say a fool because the Catholic Church and I don't get along anymore.

1 But I still made my—Rigmy and I, my buddy went in and we made—you're always
2 taught when you go somewhere always hit the nearest Catholic Church and make your
3 wish. So we did, make everybody come back safe and then we commenced to debauch
4 the whole world. You see these shanty towns and you go onto a military base that's
5 sterile and two feet off here is these shanty towns. You know, barrooms, it's just awful, it
6 was awful. There was nothing like that in Boston. I mean, how far had I been? New York
7 City? New York City was paradise compared to there.

8 KC: Sure. Was this in anyway a foreshadowing moment of what you saw in
9 Vietnam, do you think?

10 WC: Oh, yeah. Well, it was, but I didn't know it at the time.

11 KC: Sure, sure. Okay. You're one day in Okinawa, you're back on ship again.

12 WC: Yeah, and two kids never made it back. They deserted.

13 KC: Is that right, deserted in Okinawa?

14 WC: Yeah.

15 KC: Wow.

16 WC: They didn't make the trip back.

17 KC: Do you have any idea why they deserted?

18 WC: Yeah, they weren't going.

19 KC: Just because of the war itself.

20 WC: Yep. They said, "Fuck this," because I knew one, "Fuck this. I ain't going
21 back." I said, "You're crazy, man." Nope. I guess one of them turned himself in and I
22 don't know what happened to the kid I knew.

23 KC: Both draftees?

24 WC: Yeah. Our whole battalion except for the noncoms and the officers were
25 draftees. Believe it or not, all the mechanics—well, Rigney and I were the only draftees
26 because I guess everybody signs up to be a mechanic. Oh, yeah, because when I did my
27 research—everybody that came in and I pulled out all the orders, the formation orders
28 and all. Everybody had US (unwilling service) prefixes on their service, for unwilling
29 service. I didn't know what that meant 'til years later. I always thought it meant United
30 States. Unwilling service, no, most of them—the only RAs, the only Regular Army guy
31 was your E-6s, or your E-5s and above. Even some of the kids made E-5. Like I know Eli

1 made an E-5, some of them. I mean, I could've made E-5 just before I came home, but I
2 did not give it to the kids who were staying in the Army, I could care less.

3 KC: Right.

4 WC: But at that time I was already an E-4.

5 KC: Okay, you were E-4.

6 WC: Yeah, I made E-1 right away down just about in Ft. Bliss. Just before we
7 went—when I came back from my leave before we went to Vietnam there was orders.
8 They said, “Bill, you’re an E-4.” I said, “Get out of here.” Yeah. Because they had to
9 make whatever the quotas are for so many E-4s and so many E-1s and all that happy
10 stuff.

11 KC: Especially in a new battalion.

12 WC: Yeah, a year in service and I had made an E-4, which I guess is unheard of,
13 but in those days, hey, you’re a new battalion. They’ve got to fill the quotas or whatever
14 they call it in the military. It took me a year to make E-4, whoopy-do.

15 KC: So other than the need for higher ranks in this new battalion, do you think
16 there was anything specific about you that led to your rapid rise, as it were?

17 WC: Nah. Well, nah. I don’t know. I want to say yeah I was good and all that, but
18 I doubt it knowing the Army the way I do now.

19 KC: Well, you were a little bit older, had a little bit more time in, a little college.

20 WC: Yeah, I was twenty-one, whoopee.

21 KC: Okay. So you’re leaving Okinawa. Where are you headed next?

22 WC: Right to the pons. I think it was a two- or three-day trip to Vietnam.

23 KC: Where was your point of embarkation?

24 WC: You’re going to love this, Vung Tau. We were supposed to go to Qui Nhon,
25 but they turned us around for what reason I don’t know. We landed in the port of Vung
26 Tau. Which I know now is a resort area, but I didn’t know at that time. We did it the old
27 way over the side of the ship into the LST (landing ship, tank) and into the port. How
28 appropriate, how World War II-ish.

29 KC: Later on, of course, later on in the war when so many soldiers are making
30 their way to Vietnam. They step out of a plane, pressurized, largely sterile environment,
31 they step out of a plane and open their doors to Vietnam. You had some experience being

1 in Okinawa and on this ship, but nonetheless when you reach shore in Vietnam what are
2 your impressions?

3 WC: Holy shit, plain and simple. We could see a bombing raid going on in the
4 distance. I said, “Hey, this is for real.” I remember turning to Rigney, God rest the man
5 and he said, “Hey, shit, this is the real thing.” I said, “Yeah, I guess so.” It was hot. But
6 see we were accustomed to the hot because of the trip over on the ship. It was like you
7 say, I feel bad for those poor kids that had to get on those nice plains with the nice
8 stewardesses and then debark and then run into this happy shit. We were bonding, I guess
9 in a way, going over on the ship, which was good, but as the war progressed as you know
10 they just had to get bodies over there quickly.

11 KC: Sure, sure. Yes, to a man other individuals I speak with about this who left
12 the plane said their first impression was they could not believe the heat and they could
13 not believe the smell.

14 WC: Yeah, exactly. Well, the smell wasn’t bad in Vung Tau, I’m not going to lie
15 to you, until we get on the C-130 and then they drove us to Bien Hoa where we were
16 going to set up a base camp. Then I said, “Woo,” that was nasty. But it was still beautiful.
17 I’m not going to lie to you.

18 KC: So you go from Vung Tau to Bien Hoa?

19 WC: Yeah.

20 KC: Okay. How long were you there in Vung Tau?

21 WC: Enough to get down and grab your gear and get on a C-130 and fly to some
22 airport.

23 KC: That same day, then.

24 WC: Yeah.

25 KC: Okay. So you’re now in Bien Hoa.

26 WC: Yeah. Then we went to a place—well, Long Binh, but it was on the
27 outskirts. It wasn’t that big build up area. It was like two miles to the east of that. It was
28 just a field and when we had to set up—no, I’m lying to you. They already had the tents
29 set up, but we had immediately started filling sandbags.

30 KC: Now, you are the brand new battalion here and I should get this on the
31 record, what was the number of that battalion?

1 WC: It was called the 5th of the 2nd Defense Artillery.

2 KC: Now there you are. You're beginning to put the battalion actually together
3 in-country.

4 WC: Well, we had already been together in the desert, but, yeah, this is—I
5 remember the 11th because they put us on a bus after Bien Hoa to go to this place. I'll
6 never forget this, the 11th Armored Cav escorted us in a convoy to where we were going
7 to set up our base camp because we were right down the road from them.

8 KC: What are your thoughts on having to be convoyed with these escorts?

9 WC: It pissed me off because they wouldn't let us lock and load our weapons.

10 KC: Really?

11 WC: Yep. But needless to say it was ready. We still had our M-14s, which I
12 loved. They were ready to go. But you didn't have your ammo packs or anything. You
13 had two magazines that was it. So that's what? Forty shots.

14 KC: Of course the 11th Cav would've been I think probably—

15 WC: Yeah, they had been there three months I think before us.

16 KC: Sure, sure.

17 WC: So they were experts.

18 KC: Yeah, I assume it wouldn't take long to become an expert with something
19 like that. All right, what kind of daily routine are you going through as you are putting
20 the battalion together there in-country?

21 WC: The first week all we did was fill sandbags and make the tents habitable.
22 Naturally we'd go out on quote, "night patrol," around there. We still didn't have the
23 tanks yet.

24 KC: They're still on there way from the States, I assume.

25 WC: Uh, yes, yes.

26 KC: Okay. So you're going out on night patrols. Take me through a typical night
27 patrol.

28 WC: Shit yourself, number one, no lie. Well, not literally but—you didn't
29 venture more than, say, oh, I want to say half a mile from the base camp because there
30 was a village right downtown that had a steeple that the bell always rang. You'd just go
31 out there and you sit and you listen and they tell you to try to sleep, but you go ha, ha. I

1 guess it was just to acclimate you. It was probably a safe area. I don't know this for a
2 fact, but I'm just saying it was probably like just training. You realize you're in-country
3 and, you know, anybody moves—one good thing I have to say about our captain there
4 was always an officer with us. There was at least twenty men on a patrol. The officers on
5 the whole, luckily Lieutenant Row stayed with us most of the time. He was a calming
6 factor. I'm not going to lie, you were nervous as hell. Once you left the confines of that
7 base camp they let you lock and load then, but you had to take it out of the chamber as
8 soon as you came back. I swear to God I lost ten pounds every time I went out for the
9 first couple of weeks.

10 KC: What was the terrain like in this, on night patrols?

11 WC: Flat.

12 KC: Flat.

13 WC: Flat, beautiful, lush, green. In the night time quiet as hell, no lights. You
14 look around and everything's black and all you hear is—you'd see in the distance you'd
15 see like—I remember seeing Puff the Magic Dragon for the first time and that was a sight
16 to behold.

17 KC: Must've been impressive.

18 WC: That was about it. It was very nice. The village was right to your right as
19 soon as you come out. You had to call for permission to fire if you fired. Luckily, we
20 didn't fire.

21 KC: What do you take with you on one of these night patrols typically?

22 WC: I took the M-14. We took two—let's see. There was two M-60s. Everybody
23 had their M-14, and two bloop guns, two M-79s, and radios, naturally.

24 KC: Sure. You say there was a village nearby. Did you have any contact with the
25 Vietnamese in the village?

26 WC: Not at that time, no.

27 KC: Okay. Did they encourage you, superiors encourage you to not have contact?

28 WC: Exactly.

29 KC: Okay, all right, very good. Well, how many of these night patrols do you
30 think you participated in?

1 WC: Let's see. Let's see. It's December now, around Christmas. It was probably
2 about three.

3 KC: Three, okay. Do you feel that you're becoming more and more prepared for
4 what you were to face?

5 WC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. You were in a different mode now. At least I was.

6 KC: All right. Explain that to me. What's going through your mind? You say—

7 WC: This is for real. This isn't games anymore. This isn't Ft. Benning, Georgia.
8 This isn't basic training. You know, learn what you do, but really learn that weapon, take
9 care of your weapon and people are out there to kill you. You may have to kill somebody,
10 plain and simple.

11 KC: What about your tactics? I mean, you've mentioned understanding this
12 mentally.

13 WC: Believe it or not, we all went out single file just like you see in the movies.
14 Single file and you just set up in a little semi-circular or a half circle perimeter. You lay
15 out your claymores. This is how they taught—this is stuff they had never taught us, this is
16 why I think now that I think back it was training. You lay out your claymores. You get
17 your field of fires down and you just sit there.

18 KC: Now you've got to sleep out there.

19 WC: You're supposed to.

20 KC: You're supposed to sleep out there. Give me a little bit of what it's like to be
21 out there at night.

22 WC: You can't smoke. That's the—believe it or not, that was what pissed us all
23 off. You know, forget that smoking under a poncho, forget it. No booze, you're
24 completely one hundred percent alert. You're very edgy. This is in the beginning. You're
25 very, very edgy. You're always checking your weapon, at least I knew I was. I remember
26 the first night out Rig and I had trouble with the M-50. It wouldn't—we couldn't get the
27 breech to close. You're just nervous as hell.

28 KC: So you're going to curl up in a nice soft spot on the ground.

29 WC: Oh, yeah, yeah, real nice soft spot, nice and damp. You come back soaking
30 wet.

31 KC: Sure. Mosquitoes, ants, anything like that?

1 WC: Red ants but not at this particular point. You know, believe—now that I
2 think of you I think it was more of a training area. But it wasn't that bad. There was a
3 rubber plantation to the right, but they wouldn't let us in that. It was like I want to say a
4 field. Like if you get down at Cape Cod and you see the cranberry bogs, basically that's
5 it.

6 KC: All right. You're going through this new kind of training, it seems like that's
7 probably what you were going through.

8 WC: Now that I think of it, yeah, here's your on-the-job training.

9 KC: So you did this and this is December of what, 1966?

10 WC: It's still '66.

11 KC: You've got Christmas coming up.

12 WC: Yep.

13 KC: What do you do there?

14 WC: Believe it or not, we had a tag football game between the officers and the
15 enlisted men. I got everybody to—well, the captain was good. He says, "We've got to do
16 something." He dressed up as Santa Claus and then a couple of us dressed up as elves.
17 We sang Christmas carols, believe it or not.

18 KC: Really?

19 WC: Yeah. I'll never forget that Christmas.

20 KC: Well, you're going to spend the New Year's in Vietnam.

21 WC: Oh, yeah.

22 KC: Does this have any sort of effect on your twenty-one-year-old self?

23 WC: No, I just you know—I'm saying in October my ass is back in
24 Massachusetts. That's the way, believe it or not, I was looking at it.

25 KC: Is that something you kept in mind throughout your tour?

26 WC: Oh, definitely throughout the tour. In fact, I was—we'll get into that later,
27 but Lieutenant Roe got me out early to go back to college.

28 KC: Yeah. We'll definitely want to get into that later on.

29 WC: Yeah.

30 KC: All right. I assume that while you're doing this, while you're spending the
31 time here and you're going out on night patrols and the base and doing the things to make

1 the days pass. I assume that the rest of the material is slowly coming in, building up to get
2 you to your full complement, is that right?

3 WC: Yeah, I think January, I'd say January third or something we went down to
4 Newport to pick it up from a port in Saigon.

5 KC: Okay. Well, when do you go out on your first mission as part of the 5th of
6 the 2nd?

7 WC: Before that we went on a fire mission.

8 KC: Take me on that fire mission.

9 WC: Just test the tanks. It was just before Cedar Falls so you're talking January,
10 the beginning of January, because when did I get mail? The tenth? Yeah.

11 KC: What were you trying to do in this fire mission?

12 WC: Make sure the tanks work.

13 KC: What sort of things were you doing in particular?

14 WC: Well, I never got to see it because one of the tanks had flipped over. We
15 were the last vehicle in the convoy so naturally we stayed there trying to rescue the guys,
16 but to no avail.

17 KC: Okay. So you have everything in or essentially everything in here. In
18 January you're making these test runs, as it were, on this mission. Of course, Cedar Falls
19 begins later in January.

20 WC: January eighth.

21 KC: Eighth I believe it is, yes, that's right. Now, let's slow down and take a
22 larger look at Cedar Falls. What was the purpose of Operation Cedar Falls?

23 WC: To us we were going to go out and support the 1st Infantry and the 11th
24 Armored Cav and we were going to—they were taking some village. At the time I didn't
25 know it, but now it was Ben Suc.

26 KC: What was the purpose of taking this village?

27 WC: I guess it was supposedly—they told us they were going to clear out the VC
28 (Viet Cong).

29 KC: Now, obviously, the VC were very, very active in this region.

30 WC: Oh, yes.

1 KC: Of course. What sort of contact had you, and you personally didn't have, but
2 your outfit or the 11th Cav or those who you were around, what were they telling you
3 about what was taking place here?

4 WC: Keep your head down. It was funny because our tanks are wide open. See,
5 we were a novelty, too, because whenever the infantry saw us, even the tanks that we
6 supported, they loved us because you had four quad-fifties mounted on the truck. The 40-
7 millimeter tank could put out like two hundred rounds a minute, but you're standing in
8 the open while you're loading the foolish thing.

9 KC: Sure, sure. Okay, when Cedar Falls begins what were you in particular
10 doing?

11 WC: I was riding in the captain's jeep and we were fixing any—one tank had
12 broke down on the tenth of January. So I took another tank out to fix it and lo and behold
13 I got blown up.

14 KC: You were hit, your tank was hit?

15 WC: Oh, yeah.

16 KC: Explain that to me. Take me through that.

17 WC: We're slowly going down the road. I was sitting in the—let's see Jangault
18 was the rider, the driver. We were busting through the jungle. All of a sudden next thing I
19 knew I was out cold. Then I remember them dragging me to this riverbank and the
20 Dustoff came in. I kind of woke up on the helicopter.

21 KC: Now, what hit your tank? Was it a—

22 WC: A mine.

23 KC: It was a mine, a VC mine had hit your tank. Where did it hit the tank?

24 WC: Underneath.

25 KC: Okay. Where were you?

26 WC: In the driver—as they call it the commander's seat.

27 KC: The commander's seat. All right. When this thing went off, number one
28 where did it hit you and what hit you?

29 WC: In the body, let's see, my eyes and a little shrapnel.

30 KC: You say a little shrapnel. Can you give me more specifics on that?

1 WC: Well, my flack vest took most it. A little in the ass, one in the neck, bloody
2 nose, and I couldn't see.

3 KC: Who else was in the tank with you at the time?

4 WC: Let's see. There was me and two gunners. Let's see, one, two, three, four,
5 four in the turret and infantry guys on the back riding with us and the driver and myself,
6 probably about ten people.

7 KC: Ten people. How badly were the rest of them hurt?

8 WC: Means got evacuated, the sergeant. I think one infantry kid was killed. That
9 was it. I remember Means and I were on the helicopter.

10 KC: So the mine hit your tank and there's obviously—it must've been very, very
11 chaotic.

12 WC: Oh, yeah.

13 KC: Confusion, may not even had time to have been afraid, but then again maybe
14 you did.

15 WC: No, but I remember—well, when I was in the hospital I had soiled myself
16 and there was blood all over the place.

17 KC: So you had been hit. Were you badly enough injured that you couldn't get
18 out of the tank by yourself or were you able to get out?

19 WC: I must've crawled—I don't know to be perfectly honest. I must've crawled
20 out.

21 KC: Okay. You find yourself—I guess you said you woke up.

22 WC: Yep.

23 KC: Did you wake up in the helicopter?

24 WC: No, right on the bank because I remember the Dustoff pilot yelling to Eli.
25 Eli told them because of our training. He said, "I threw purple smoke." I remember on the
26 radio saying, "No, no, I'll tell you what color smoke."

27 KC: Right, right, right. Just to keep the VC in case they're listening, from
28 popping smoke.

29 WC: Oh, yeah, because they were shooting and all.

30 KC: Sure. So you're laying there on the bank. Was it a river or creek?

1 WC: Yeah, it was like a river. Knowing what I know now it was probably the
2 Song Me River when I did a little research and tried to do some stuff but yeah.

3 KC: Do you remember what's going through your mind while you're laying on
4 the bank?

5 WC: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

6 KC: Explain it to me.

7 WC: Oh, God, get me to the hospital.

8 KC: How long were you there before Dustoff arrived?

9 WC: I don't know, probably twenty minutes.

10 KC: Did it seem like twenty minutes?

11 WC: I honestly don't know, Kyle, to tell you the exact—I don't know.

12 KC: Sure. So you do remember the pilot, the Dustoff pilot speaking to you.

13 WC: Yep. You know I remember him on—well, on the radio saying to Eli, “No,
14 I'll tell you the color of smoke.” But he came right in. I remember that I saw it coming in.
15 Then they put me on the helicopter and then I think it was Lai Khe or some hospital when
16 I was there.

17 KC: Who put you on the helicopter. Do you remember?

18 WC: Eli and Jangault, the driver of the tank that blew up.

19 KC: Okay. So you're medevac'ed out. Where again did you say you received
20 treatment?

21 WC: I think, I'm not sure, but I believe it was Lai Khe, L-A-I and then K-H-E, I
22 think. I'm not sure.

23 KC: Okay. What kind of treatment did you receive there?

24 WC: You're going to love this. The medic that attended to me I went to high
25 school with.

26 KC: Really? What was his name?

27 WC: Joe Giadonno.

28 KC: Was he in the same class as you?

29 WC: Yeah.

30 KC: That's kind of a strange coincidence, I would think.

1 WC: I remember him saying, “Billy, you’re all right. You’re all right. Don’t
2 worry about it.” He says, “What a way to earn a Purple Heart.” I said, “Hey, can I see?
3 That’s all,” because I couldn’t see for a while. He says, “Don’t worry, don’t worry.
4 You’re all right.” I remember the bright lights whether it was an operating table or
5 whatever. But, yep, so I stayed two days there.

6 KC: What did you think of the treatment you received there?

7 WC: Excellent without a doubt.

8 KC: You were there just two days then.

9 WC: Yep. That’s all. I wanted out of there.

10 KC: Then you went back out. Why did you want out so badly?

11 WC: I wanted to go back to where I came from. I wanted to be with everybody
12 else and show them I was okay, you know.

13 KC: Sure, sure. Although certainly a frightening experience it doesn’t sound like
14 the wounds were bad enough to incapacitate you for a very long time.

15 WC: No, no, not at all. I had a patch, big deal, a gauze bandage over my eyes and
16 Band Aids on my legs and ass and one on my neck. Probably a couple of stitches, I don’t
17 remember.

18 KC: Sure. Well, you make it back to your unit a few days later. What’s the
19 reception you received?

20 WC: Oh, open—well, when I was in the hospital Lieutenant Roe and captain
21 came to visit me anyway.

22 KC: That must’ve made you feel pretty good I would think.

23 WC: Oh, yeah. I always told you those two officers I held the highest respect of
24 my life for those men.

25 KC: What about the rest of the men when you came back, glad to see you?

26 WC: Oh, they were all glad, you know. The typical, “You, asshole, I knew you
27 couldn’t die. You’re lucky,” all this, stuff like that.

28 KC: The way that males relate to one another in situations like that.

29 WC: Yeah, yeah, you laugh at everything and you try to make a joke of it.

30 KC: Sure. Now this being hit like this it must’ve seemed incredibly random for
31 you. What did this do to you for the rest of your tour there? Was this something that you

1 saw as now this can happen to me at any time or was this a totally random thing that I
2 have no control over?

3 WC: I think it woke all of us, but see before—I don't know if I want to say this is
4 good or bad, but when I told you we were test firing the weapons and we had to pull
5 those four kids eventually out of the tank that turned over, that exposed us all. This is for
6 real. Now it got more personalized with them trying to blow my ass up.

7 KC: Sure, sure. Well, what if anything did you or your unit do for the remainder
8 of Cedar Falls?

9 WC: We went back I know when it was over and then we went back two days
10 after and went right out to Junction City.

11 KC: Okay. Did your unit change its tactics or its approach or anything as a result
12 of the mine explosion?

13 WC: No, because everything we were doing was new to us anyway. We went
14 back to you know—we just watch them burn villages, evacuate Vietnamese people and
15 stand guard for that blow up the jungle, whatever. Do convoys back and forth to help
16 supplies come back, whatever the mission was. It was basically either support a poor
17 infantry unit out there—I remember I was exposed to my first B-52 bombing and that
18 was an experience and a half.

19 KC: Explain that to me.

20 WC: Captain said, "Everybody in your holes." We says, "Why?" We were in, I
21 want to say it was some base camp—fire base somewhere out there. Again I ran into a
22 kid I was in basic with, Joe Coyle. He was the poor infantry kid from the 1st Infantry. I
23 hear somebody yelling my name. We shot the shit with them for a couple of hours, but
24 when he said in the holes I remember Joe saying, "Get in them." So we get in them and
25 the earth shook for like, oh, ten minutes. I've never experienced—I've never been in an
26 earthquake or anything, but people that have said that was it. It was awful.

27 KC: How many B-52s made this run?

28 WC: I don't know. I have no idea. But I remember in the holes and we dove,
29 thank God the infantry had already dug holes. We were in their holes with them. When
30 somebody blows an air horn you jump back on in the—back in the tank and you start
31 firing away.

1 KC: What was the purpose of these particular B-52 raids?

2 WC: I don't know. I don't know, Kyle, to be honest. I guess they were hitting a
3 stronghold or something that we were near. I know it was near some rubber plantation
4 and that was it.

5 KC: Okay. Now you mentioned that your participation in Cedar Falls and mostly
6 in support of infantry units and things like that.

7 WC: Yeah.

8 KC: Of course Junction City is somewhat of a follow-up, I guess you could say.

9 WC: Yep, it's an exact follow—

10 KC: In February of '67.

11 WC: Or maybe Cedar Falls was harbinger or a decoy. You know, in the little
12 reading that I've done on it I believe Cedar Falls was the lead up to Junction City because
13 more infantry battalions, I think they took in the 1st, the 25th, the 196th. It was on a more
14 major—on Westmoreland's lovely plans whatever they were.

15 KC: Okay. Well, to you at the time what did you know about the purpose of
16 Junction City?

17 WC: Nothing, really—you're going out and basically you're doing your duties. I
18 hate to say it, but to kill or capture an enemy.

19 KC: Sure. Were you able to that or do you know?

20 WC: I guess so. I guess so.

21 KC: You say you guess so and I understand that it's completely chaotic—

22 WC: I didn't have any body counts, no, but put it this way there were dead bodies
23 out there.

24 KC: Sure, sure. Now, were you doing any of the firing in your tank?

25 WC: Oh, yeah. Actually I was doing the loading.

26 KC: Loading at this point.

27 WC: Because, knock on wood, the tanks weren't acting up yet.

28 KC: Okay. So the tanks did eventually begin to act up and this is during Junction
29 City.

30 WC: Oh, did they ever especially with vapor locking and transmissions because
31 they weren't used to pulling that heavy load.

1 KC: Okay. Can you give me any more specifics on that? You're there to fix tanks
2 and the tanks start to give you problems there at a very critical point in early 1967.

3 WC: Right.

4 KC: How does that change what you're doing?

5 WC: Geez, Kyle, it changes due to the adverse effects of when you're changing
6 them and where you're changing them. My notion of staying back on the base camp was
7 washed away immediately when I got to Vietnam. You know, sitting in some comfy
8 place just fixing tanks and trucks. You had to be out there with them because if they
9 throw a track the poor crew didn't know what to do so you had to go out and do it. I can
10 remember changing an engine down in the delta in the middle of a firefight. But you
11 just—how did it change me? I guess the conditions changed me. You knew you were
12 under fire and that was it.

13 KC: All right. So Junction City, was this the last of the operations, major
14 operations you participated in?

15 WC: At that time, yeah, because then we transferred down to the delta.

16 KC: You went down to, what, IV Corps I guess in the delta. What sort of
17 operations were you involved with down there?

18 WC: Well, number one was to help the 9th Infantry establish a base.

19 KC: The ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) 9th Infantry?

20 WC: No, no thank God. No, the American 9th Infantry.

21 KC: Oh, okay. Okay. I know the 9th ARVN Division was down there in IV
22 Corps, as well.

23 WC: Oh, yes, they were.

24 KC: Okay. Well, you sound like you have some—

25 WC: I have no respect for them except for Vietnamese rangers. Every time there
26 was a fight—you go down to a town and you'd see all these clowns hanging around, but
27 whenever there was a fight they were nowhere to be found. I don't mean by a fistfight,
28 either.

29 KC: Well, you're certainly not the only person to express that opinion of the
30 ARVN and their fighting effectiveness here. How much contact did you have with the
31 ARVN?

1 WC: We had to bail them out a couple of times down in the delta when they got
2 overrun or would have to move quickly to give them gun support when there was no
3 helicopters. If they were within a twenty-mile radius at Dong Tam we'd have to go out
4 and rescue them.

5 KC: Okay. When you say rescue them, how would you do it? Take me on a
6 mission.

7 WC: Get down there and start firing away and clean out what was ever down
8 there.

9 KC: Okay. Of course, this was a VC probably exclusively down there, I would
10 guess.

11 WC: I believe so. I don't—no more pith helmets were found down in the delta. I
12 don't think—Junction City and Cedar Falls I'd give you a maybe, but down in the delta I
13 doubt there were any hard core, I don't think.

14 KC: Sure, sure. What else were you doing down here?

15 WC: Okay. We do a lot of village securing, a lot of bridge securing, a lot of
16 convoy running. Actually, we lived in Tan An. The best duty I ever had was guarding Air
17 America. They had a little, how can we say it, a shady airport. So we just had us and the
18 9th Infantry, poor infantry guys. We had to support their base. That was nice duty.

19 KC: Well, explain that to me. What made it so nice?

20 WC: The food, number one.

21 KC: What kind of food were you getting there?

22 WC: What were we getting there? Steaks, regular cooked meals, regular Thai
23 food that when they come back they'd unload their little Piper Cubs and whatever came
24 out was food for the boys, food and booze for the boys.

25 KC: That must've felt pretty good.

26 WC: Yeah, like I said Rigney, God bless him, he got stuck there for months, God
27 bless him, because they left two tanks down there. We flipped and I lost. But no, that was
28 good duty. That was excellent duty.

29 KC: What sort of interaction did you have with the U.S. 9th?

30 WC: Ninth, they were, believe it or not now we had been there for, what, five
31 months. So we were experienced. These poor guys, I really felt bad for them. They were

1 on boats fighting a war, believe it or not. They'd get on boats and we'd have to load these
2 big tanks on barges and go down and help them out when their artillery couldn't come.
3 Or if they would take over a village we'd surround the village. These poor kids they were
4 worse—they were very poorly trained, I thought.

5 KC: Where did they come from?

6 WC: Um, Ft. Leavenworth, Kansas.

7 KC: Oka. All right. You mentioned that you were securing villages, bridges, et
8 cetera. Was your outfit involved in any civil action?

9 WC: No. Not civil actions but naturally if they were building something naturally
10 we'd provide support for them. You'd play with the little kids. If a medic was going, an
11 infantry medic would go into a village, we'd just go there and provide security for them.

12 KC: Okay. Now, so this is—what month would this have been?

13 WC: Oh, it had to be from April until I left we were down in the delta.

14 KC: Okay. Most of your time was spent down in the delta, then, it sounds like.

15 WC: Oh, yeah. Baptism by fire I called the first one and it was a little better
16 down in the delta.

17 KC: All right. What were you doing when you weren't on a mission? What were
18 you doing back at base?

19 WC: We weren't back at base that much. We stayed out. We lived in a village for
20 a whole month.

21 KC: Which village was it?

22 WC: Pardon me?

23 KC: Which village was it?

24 WC: Oh, God, I don't know, Tan something or other.

25 KC: All right.

26 WC: I'm sorry. I don't know which village it was there were—An something or
27 other. I have no idea.

28 KC: Sure, sure. Well, when you did have time off, when you weren't on a
29 mission, when you weren't—

1 WC: Oh, back at base camp you pull the tanks back in and do the preventive
2 maintenance. Luckily enough, I didn't have to go out on guard duty at night. Whatever
3 base camp you're in, so listen to the Rolling Stones and smoke cigarettes. That's it.

4 KC: Did you have any contact with your friends or family back home?

5 WC: Oh, yeah. When we had—the mail was good. Don't forget back in my early
6 times over there in late '66 and early '67 we were even getting letters from the Medford,
7 Massachusetts, kids in school. America was—Medford was still behind their troops. You
8 know, you get little letters from kids and all that.

9 KC: What did that do for you?

10 WC: I thought it was great and naturally the letters from my then-girlfriend but
11 now my wife. Those are the ones—naturally mail does wonders.

12 KC: Did you write back?

13 WC: Oh, yeah.

14 KC: About how often?

15 WC: I tried to write, even though it wouldn't get mailed for days, I would try to
16 write something every day.

17 KC: Is that right?

18 WC: Yeah.

19 KC: Just to friends, family, girlfriends, things like that.

20 WC: Mostly to Patsy, mostly to my wife and my mother. I know, she was as my
21 friend did. My friend did write me once a week. "You idiot," you know, "How many
22 have you killed today," stuff like that. "Keep your head down and don't get wounded
23 anymore," you know, stuff like that. Who was going out with who, who was getting laid,
24 stuff like that.

25 KC: Sure. What was the morale of the unit in general and you in particular at this
26 time?

27 WC: I think our unit, believe it or not, I think it was excellent. I have to say.
28 Well, you get a new captain, but he never came out to visit us but once. I would say
29 amongst the draftees, anybody that was drafted it was excellent. It was an excellent
30 bonding factor. Everybody took care of everybody else.

31 KC: Did you get any R&R (rest and relaxation) while you were there?

1 WC: Yes. I got a week, Easter week. Rigney and I went to Tokyo.

2 KC: What did you do in Tokyo?

3 WC: The first thing I did was I went to church and said, "Thank God." After that
4 ate and drank. That was it and took a bath the first night. I remember Christmas, ah
5 Christmas, Easter I called Patsy up and told her it was a riot because Rigney and I on the
6 bath tub had this nasty, nasty brown ring because we took a bath instead of a shower. It
7 had that lovely ass, red ass clay in it. That's what I remember.

8 KC: What was it like going from Tokyo, which must've seemed like just heaven
9 at the time, to going back to your unit? Were you in a hurry to go back or was it—?

10 WC: Oh, no, no. You didn't—actually, I wanted to go to Australia, but that was
11 for officers and above. Naturally, you couldn't go to Hawaii because you had to be
12 married. So we went to—I didn't want to go to an Asian country, but hey, the captain
13 said, "You two are going." "All right. We're going." It was all right, nothing special. It
14 was a vacation like anything else. I took the bullet train, went up and saw Mount
15 Fujiyama. Bought the stupid presents for everybody, the jackets for my little brother,
16 knick-knacks for my mother, stuff like that.

17 KC: Sure. Now this is, what, April I guess of '67.

18 WC: Yeah.

19 KC: You still have quite a bit of time left in-country.

20 WC: Mm-hmm.

21 KC: What were you doing when you got back? I guess you were going back to
22 the delta.

23 WC: Um, what were we doing?

24 KC: Just the same type of missions, support, et cetera?

25 WC: Yeah, yeah, same type of missions. It's just in a different location, very flat
26 and very wet.

27 KC: Okay. Now what did you think of the enemy you were facing? What was
28 your opinion of the VC that you encountered?

29 WC: It had changed, believe it or not. I mean, this was one—I still didn't
30 understand why one human wanted to kill another and to this day I don't. My outlook on

1 life, you don't bother me I don't bother you. I hope to say I maintained that in Vietnam.

2 You bothered me I'm going to bother you back.

3 KC: What were your initial expectations of the VC?

4 WC: Oh, a screaming maniac doing charges and no regard for life. No respect for
5 life, I guess is what I'm trying to say.

6 KC: Did that make it emotionally easier or more difficult to engage them?

7 WC: By April, I don't want to say hardened, but I could care less. I just wanted
8 to get home.

9 KC: Sure, sure. Had your impression of the VC, your evaluation of the VC
10 changed from your initial expectations to later on?

11 WC: Yes. Oh, yes.

12 KC: Explain how that changed and what that meant.

13 WC: It changed, I believe it really changed first when the tank flipped over. This
14 is the incident before we went out on—before I got wounded. Then when I got wounded I
15 said, “Hey, some fucking,” pardon me, “some person is trying to kill me.” I think from
16 that point on they weren't a person. They were quote, “an enemy” then. You just had to
17 be wary of everything—your surrounding—totally, totally, totally aware of your
18 surroundings. You couldn't—don't give anybody a break. Just get mine and my friends
19 the hell out of here.

20 KC: Like you say, you had to be on guard constantly.

21 WC: Yes, constant.

22 KC: Constantly on guard because of the VC. Now, of course, as we know the VC
23 were very, very difficult to pick out.

24 WC: Very elusive, yes.

25 KC: Yes, certainly in villages, one you may pass and not know it. What did this
26 make your relationship like with the villagers that you encountered, with the rest of the
27 native Vietnamese?

28 WC: Well, you know Kyle, it's funny because mostly in a village it would be
29 women and children, not too many men, older man you'd see, but you wouldn't see
30 anybody from say fifteen to forty. You may see him out in the field tilling his crops or
31 whatever, but you'd never interact with a person that age, never.

1 KC: Okay. Was it easy or difficult to separate your opinion or your
2 understanding, evaluation of villagers versus VC? Was this something that you said
3 you're all potentially VC and therefore you're all potentially an enemy I'm going to have
4 to deal with immediately if necessary?

5 WC: After I was wounded, yes, everybody was an enemy. I hate to say it, but
6 yes, everybody was an enemy. I would say, "Man, who in the hell is trying to kill me
7 now?" But then you'd see them picking garbage dumps and you'd say, "How could this
8 be an enemy?" but then you say, "Listen, idiot, you've got—you got blown up.
9 Somebody had to do it."

10 KC: Right. What is your evaluation of the VC as an enemy?

11 WC: I thought he was a damn good enemy, if there's such a thing. This man was
12 dedicated. This man was defending his own. He was defending his country like I'd
13 defend mine probably if somebody was coming after me.

14 KC: What did you think was most effective about the VC?

15 WC: What was the most effectiveness?

16 KC: Mm-hmm.

17 WC: Ooh.

18 KC: What were their greatest strengths, do you think?

19 WC: They were dedicated, very dedicated to a purpose. They were excellent.
20 You could never get them. They were a professional soldier, I guess, with limited means,
21 but with those limited means they knew what they were doing.

22 KC: It must've been incredibly frustrating, I would think, to be so in every
23 measurable way militarily superior to such an enemy.

24 WC: Very, very, very, very yes. Once you got into that—like I say, once you got
25 into that military mode you say, "Where is this man going?" or, "Where is this person
26 going? You just mortared us. You just shot at us and we can't find them."

27 KC: Oftentimes I think that this would lead to, this frustration, would lead to
28 striking out against anyone who was seemingly an enemy.

29 WC: That crossed our minds but luckily no, no. How can I say this properly?
30 Once we were in a—I won't say we wrecked it, but we did a number on a bar in
31 downtown Dong Tam, which was outside of My Tho. That was where the 9th were and

1 we could go into the village. So we went in and there was—somebody said something
2 and boom all of a sudden the bar got wrecked. But as far as physical damage, I mean
3 human damage, nah. We didn't—thank God there was no—what the hell? Where was
4 Calley and his crew there? No, that didn't hit our battalion. You know, we had to fire. We
5 had to take out a village or a hut, we just did it. We hoped that there had been enough
6 warning before we fired in there, but once somebody's firing at you, you just fire back.

7 KC: Sure, sure.

8 WC: But as far as retaliating against an enemy due to frustration, thank God no.
9 The idea crossed our minds, don't get me wrong, but no, we never did it.

10 KC: All right. Well, you've given me your impression of the enemy and their
11 abilities and their strengths, what about your own leadership? What about the American
12 leadership?

13 WC: Okay. Captain—Am I supposed to mention names or what?

14 KC: It's completely up to you.

15 WC: Captain Steinbacher and Lieutenant Roe, I cherish the men. They were
16 excellent. Roe even got me—showed me how to get out and in fact he recommended.
17 Steinbeck was a dedicated man, but we lost him when we were down in the delta.

18 KC: You say you lost him, was he killed?

19 WC: Pardon me.

20 KC: Was he killed or did he just transfer out?

21 WC: No, no, he made major.

22 KC: Okay.

23 WC: That's where his career ended. He was promoted and he went and we got a
24 Captain Harless who we saw once. From what my buddies tell me he never came out of
25 his bunker. The first sergeant was a complete asshole, little runt. Most of the E-6s, they
26 knew we were running it so they let us do what we want. Then there was a few like
27 Sergeant Perault, he was excellent. Old, man, getting ready to go out and we just
28 protected his ass whenever they sent him out with us. But it was, how can I say it? It was
29 a sergeant's war with us. They'd say, "Take two tanks and go here." Lieutenant Segal he
30 was okay, but he just let us do what we wanted to do. Then when we were down in the
31 delta it was a little different when we were with big operations with the 1st Infantry and

1 the 11th Armored. You were more structured. Down in the delta we were, quote,
2 “experienced,” unquote. They let us do—shit, we did what we wanted to do because a 9th
3 Infantry captain or something would come up and say, “I need two tanks.” So Segal
4 would look at us, “Yeah, yeah. We’ll go today. We’ll do this.” The E-6s, they would
5 never leave base camp, either. They would find an excuse not to go on the camp.

6 KC: So it sounds like it was kind of a mixed bag for you just like any individuals.

7 WC: Oh, yeah. All the draftees, they were kids like me, just like me. Maybe I
8 was a little more, I don’t want to say educated and came from a little better family
9 background, but a lot of the kids were like from Alabama and Mississippi. They were
10 doing what they had to do and then they were going to go back to what they were doing.
11 They just wanted to get out alive. We were lucky in that aspect. We only lost a few
12 people.

13 KC: Now, you’ve mentioned before that you had very little contact with racial
14 minorities growing up in New England. Was this the case? I gather that it wasn’t in your
15 battalion in Vietnam.

16 WC: Oh, no. We were about, actually we were about—oh, let me—somebody
17 asked me this before. I would say seventy percent white, twenty percent black, and ten
18 percent Hispanic. Except for the—now, most of your NCOs (noncommissioned officer)
19 now, a lot of them were black, or African American.

20 KC: Sure, sure. Now that leads me to this next question which begs to be asked.
21 At this time in 1966, 1967, did you witness any episodes of racial unrest or problems.

22 WC: Nope.

23 KC: Not at this time.

24 WC: Heard of them but, nope, we never had them.

25 KC: Okay, you heard of them.

26 WC: Oh, yeah.

27 KC: Did you hear of them more prevalently in the rear or in combat units?

28 WC: Mostly in the rear. You know, when you talk to the kids in the 9th Infantry,
29 we would be doing nothing and them poor bastards would have to go to formations. They
30 were in the chicken shit army. These poor kids after they come out from, let’s say, three
31 days of fighting or whatever and then they’d have to get back and fall out in formation

1 with boots and then they'd see us just laying around there drinking beers, fixing our tanks
2 because nobody ever really bothered us.

3 KC: Sure, sure. Well, when do you receive your orders to leave Vietnam?

4 WC: Ah, that was in May. Lieutenant Roe came to me and says, "Billy, you don't
5 belong here." I said, "What? What are you talking about?" He says, "You're going back
6 to school." I says, "Nah, nah, I don't want to go back. I've got no desire to go to school."
7 He says, "I'm telling you. Write your buddies and tell them to get you in any college in
8 the World, go to a community college, do anything." So as a joke I sent off a letter. In
9 June Lieutenant Roe flew in and said, "I just signed something." I said, "What?" He says,
10 "You're going home in August." I said, "What?" He said, "Just shut up. Keep your
11 mouth shut. I'll get it by the captain and the first sergeant, but you've been approved for
12 college." I said, "Where am I going?" because my buddies had told me they put me—
13 where the hell was it, North Shore Community College. They accepted me with open
14 arms and all that. So I knew I was going home at the end of August.

15 KC: Why did this lieutenant pick you out?

16 WC: Basically he liked me and he knew—he just said, "You don't belong here.
17 You've done what you had to do." As a matter of fact, I think he says, "Hey, you're not
18 losing your life over here under me." So God bless him. I wish I could run into the man
19 again.

20 KC: Yeah. That must've created a pretty strong bond between you.

21 WC: Even the guys in there like Rigney and all my buddies that were down at
22 delta, even Lieutenant Segal who was assigned to us down in the delta they said, "Smart
23 move. We should've done the same thing," but a lot of the kids—I'll never forget Eli. He
24 said, "You son of a bitch," he says, "The only way you're getting out of here is your
25 brains and God bless you I wish I could go." He was saying he wished he could
26 remember how to spell Mississippi so he could go back to college. But, you know, that
27 was—I lucked out. I found a man that liked me.

28 KC: Sure sounds like it.

29 WC: Yeah. To this day, I mean, I wish I only did three years of college, but hey, I
30 don't know I just couldn't finish it. But hey, it's—I owe my life to the man because two
31 of my buddies got killed just before they came home. They were doing something that

1 they shouldn't have done, but I don't think that would've happened if I was there.
2 Actually, I'll brag a little. I took care of a lot of people, too. If I knew one tank wasn't
3 ready to go out and these kids were scared I knew how to freeze up an engine for an hour.
4 Roe knew this and some of the people knew this, but you just talk to the kid and say,
5 "Here, go to sick call and tell them you're nervous or something, but I'll make sure your
6 tank isn't running." We'd make sure that the other tank would cover for them, stuff like
7 that. Little tricks, they knew what was going on, but they wouldn't do it. If we thought a
8 mission sucked we could screw the tanks up easy, which was good.

9 KC: You mentioned that you had two friends killed in an incident. Is this
10 something you care to talk about or no?

11 WC: Not really. What they did is they stole Segal's jeep and they were going to
12 make a trip to Saigon. They got killed on the way back because the assholes, they left at
13 six at night and they got ambushed on a road. I found that out when I was in college
14 because the boys were still writing to me. But four days before they go home, they
15 wanted to get laid in Saigon, the fools. They got jumped and they got killed.

16 KC: Wow.

17 WC: Yep, wonderful.

18 KC: What's it like for you to leave these men?

19 WC: Terrible, terrible.

20 KC: What did you do?

21 WC: Oh, I felt so guilty, but they all said, "Get out of here, go!" "We're coming
22 home in two more months anyway". By then we were pretty—we were, quote,
23 "seasoned" veterans. Oh, it was a big joke. The one thing I had to say though, the son of a
24 bitch captain and first sergeant put me on a patrol the last night.

25 KC: It's your last night in-country and they put you on patrol.

26 WC: Yep. That's all right. Lieutenant Roe came to my aid. He was just going to
27 make captain and he happened to be the officer of the day in this big complex. We
28 must've wasted a million dollars worth of ammunition. I saw a movement out there.

29 KC: So the lieutenant went with you.

30 WC: No. He was the officer of the day so we were calling for permission to fire.
31 He says, "Who's this?" I said—I'll never forget it, "Devastate Charlie 8 Alpha." He says,

1 “Definitely.” He called in Spookys. He called in everything. It was nothing there, but—
2 and the captain, I saluted him and the first sergeant. He says, “Cameron, we knew you did
3 it.” I said, “Well, did you get your fucking ass out of the bunker?” I’ll never forget that as
4 long as I live. It was Bearcat. That was where our headquarters, I guess, had been moved
5 to, I had never been there. But you had to process out there. Oh, there was almost a riot
6 when they sent me out on patrol.

7 KC: Of your friends?

8 WC: Oh, they were going to refuse to go. I said, “Ah, what’s going to happen?” I
9 says, “I’ll show you what’s going to happen.” Oh, man, and all the kids in—I think it was
10 in 9th Infantry headquarters, too. They were all saying yay because it kept them up all
11 night. You knew no VC were getting anywhere near the place. They never came near the
12 place anyway. We were mortared once, I guess, there. But no I cost the U.S. government
13 lots of money that night.

14 KC: Why do you think the captain sent you out?

15 WC: Because he was an asshole. He was pissed that I was—he—I don’t know. I
16 think they were pissed because I was going to college. I was a draftee. I still had my—I
17 won’t say better-than-thou attitude, but I was going home. See ya’ later, you know. He
18 was a real pisser with his shiny little cowboy boots and that little weasel first sergeant, he
19 just smiled. I says, “Well, I hope you get to be the youngest first sergeant in the Army,
20 but,” I says, “I’m out of here.” They would—my buddies were writing when I was home
21 I would laugh. “You wouldn’t believe, they’re still talking about that first night, that last
22 night that you left.” Oh, yeah. The captain said, “Nobody else is going to college,” but
23 two other kids went to college. I loved it.

24 KC: That must’ve frosted him.

25 WC: Oh, it frosted his ass.

26 KC: All right. When do you leave Vietnam?

27 WC: When?

28 KC: When?

29 WC: October, no, August—I don’t know. I should remember the date like the
30 back of my hand. Let’s see. I was there ten months, eleven—I don’t know. I want to say
31 August sometime, August of ’67.

1 KC: That sounds right given the other dates that you had there. So you're headed
2 back across the pond.

3 WC: Yep.

4 KC: You've already been accepted to, was it North Shore, you say, Community
5 College?

6 WC: North Shore Community College, yep.

7 KC: What did you hope to do once you got home? What's the first thing you
8 wanted to do?

9 WC: The first thing I wanted to do, I wanted to see my parents.

10 KC: Okay. Can you describe that meeting for me?

11 WC: Well, my father had almost stopped me from getting arrested because at
12 Logan Airport there was a second lieutenant that demanded I salute him in the airport. I
13 told him to go fuck himself. He was screaming and I was screaming and my father just
14 come over and said, "Hey, the kid just got back from Vietnam. Leave him alone." "That
15 doesn't give him any right." I said, "Fuck you." All he had on was a national defense
16 medal so I knew he hadn't been over there, but the creep wanted me to salute him. Ha!
17 Then naturally I hugged my father. He and I stopped and he said, "You're finally twenty-
18 one. We stopped for a beer at Mike's Café in Malden and then I went home and saw my
19 family. It was tearful, but that was it. Your brothers and sisters, how many did you kill?
20 And your mother and father are just happy you're home, stuff like that.

21 KC: Sure, sure. How did the community greet you?

22 WC: I didn't have any problems. I had no problems. I got rid of the uniform as
23 soon as I got home and I never put it on again.

24 KC: Now, you were completely out at this time.

25 WC: Well, yeah, they say you had to go in the Reserves and all that. I didn't have
26 to do that.

27 KC: Oh, is that right? So you didn't even have to do Reserve time, then?

28 WC: Nah. I didn't do shit because I was in school and I got married.

29 KC: All right. Well, so many Vietnam veterans report receiving just disgraceful,
30 shameful treatment by so many of the American public.

1 WC: Yes. Ugh, horrid, horrid. No, no, Kyle, I didn't except for that once incident
2 with the—I saw the protestors at Oakland and San Francisco when I was flying out, but I
3 didn't care. They didn't bother me. I didn't bother them. Oh, no, these kids. I'm talking to
4 some kid like Rigney in Louisville got in literally a brawl at a bar in there and Bolding,
5 California a couple of my buddies you know they got arrested because someone was
6 saying about it. Nah, I didn't—I could care less. Shut the book on that chapter of my life,
7 so I thought.

8 KC: Well, let's look at it like this. You're home in the fall of 1967 and, of course,
9 this war continues for an awful lot longer and becomes much more intense. The public
10 outcry against the war becomes much more intense. It really becomes an absolute mess,
11 for lack of a better term. Are you following this very closely?

12 WC: Oh, yeah, especially until October and then the following year when my
13 best friend got drafted and killed. Oh, yeah, I really got changed then.

14 KC: So how did that change you?

15 WC: Oh, it sucks. When Spring and Gasman got killed that really sent me on a
16 loop and then my buddy who had just graduated from Northeastern with a degree in
17 engineering, he was an only son and didn't have to go, but he says, "No, you went, I'm
18 going." I said, "No, bullshit. If you don't have to go, don't go." He wouldn't listen to me.

19 KC: Why did he want to go so badly?

20 WC: He just figured it was his duty, you know.

21 KC: Okay.

22 WC: He was an only son. Here he is a civil engineer with a degree and they put
23 him in the fucking 196th Infantry as a ground pounder. Naturally, the kid got killed on my
24 wedding anniversary. Oh, yeah, it was just lovely.

25 KC: Wow.

26 WC: So you can see my love for the Army now.

27 KC: Sure, sure.

28 WC: I'll tell you, it changed in October when I knew they were all out safe. I was
29 still hurt and what happened is when they—I skated through that year at North Shore. It
30 was a joke. It was my sophomore year. I skated, but their deaths just croaked me and

1 when I went off and finally married Patsy. Later I went back to BC, but I never finished. I
2 should've, but I didn't, shame on me.

3 KC: What about the protest to the war? Was this something you could embrace
4 or something you were opposed to? Given your experiences in Vietnam and knowing
5 what was going on there from your prospective, how did you interpret this growing
6 outcry against the war?

7 WC: On one hand they had a right to protest. That was no problem. You know,
8 go against LBJ, go against Nixon I could care less. Say all you want. But once you start
9 spitting on people and dishonoring them then I told them—then I actually got in
10 confrontations and said, “What is this?” I’ll be honest, I couldn’t look at Asian people too
11 beneficially.

12 KC: So has that changed over the years?

13 WC: I finally about two years ago I started to mellow. But then with Iraq and Iran
14 I just went nuts again. You know, those poor kids. None of them were drafted. That’s
15 why I feel bad for them.

16 KC: Sure. Well, you’ve made it home safe and sound. You got married. When
17 did you get married?

18 WC: Mm-hmm, had three wonderful children who now they’ve given me
19 grandchildren. Patsy stayed with me all these years and I retired and got cancer. It hasn’t
20 been too bad.

21 KC: When did you get married?

22 WC: When?

23 KC: When?

24 WC: Uh, '69.

25 KC: 1969. You said you had how many children again?

26 WC: Three.

27 KC: Three children. How many grandchildren?

28 WC: Three.

29 KC: Three, one from each?

30 WC: Yeah, and hopefully there’s two more on the way.

31 KC: Terrific. That sounds great. Now, you say that you have cancer now.

1 WC: Yep.

2 KC: Do you think this was—?

3 WC: I know it is. I went to—see, I got a hundred percent—well, it's not
4 permanent, but I have two forms of cancer. I lost a kidney and that was under Agent
5 Orange and I also came down with a lymphoma that was also Agent Orange related. So I
6 filed a claim. That was my last thank you from Vietnam because the one cancer I had—I
7 can blame the kidney on smoking maybe, but this it's called the Waldenström's
8 Macroglobulinemia. It's a rare, rare cancer like one in two million get it, but they say,
9 yep, that's directly related to Agent Orange.

10 KC: I could only imagine that this would increase your frustration with your—
11 not necessarily all of your experiences, but many of your experiences in the war of
12 having to go. How else do you think the war has affected you personally?

13 WC: Well, I respect life like there's no tomorrow. You live every day to its
14 fullest extent. You try to be nice to people. If it isn't an earth-shattering experience, if it
15 isn't life and death, don't let it bother you. That's definitely how I try to lead my life.
16 Everybody has a choice in life. Stay within the bounds of the law and I respect that.

17 KC: What do you think you learned about yourself most as a result of your
18 experiences there?

19 WC: Oh, wow. Myself? As long as you have good people around you, you're
20 safe. As long as you have good people, whether it be the military, my wife, my children,
21 my friends, as long as they support you and they're true believers in you, you're all right.
22 You'll make it. You'll be okay.

23 KC: Do you participate with any veterans' organizations, any reunions or
24 anything like that?

25 WC: I went to one reunion back in '89 with the Dusters. I lasted one day there.
26 They all wanted to fight the war again. I said, "See ya later." It was in Indianapolis and I
27 flew right back home. That was it.

28 KC: Sure, I hear that a lot from a number of individuals who prefer to just—not
29 necessarily forget it, but to leave it behind as something that's passed and move on.

30 WC: Right. When Rigney, my buddy, died of cancer last year that was—I still
31 have two people, David Bovard and Larry Bratten, I still converse with them about five

1 times a year, but other than that, that's my ties to the war. Naturally, I visit Michael's
2 grave. There's two of my friends, one died before I went and one died after. I still go up
3 to visit their graves about once a month.

4 KC: Have you ever made it to Washington, D.C., to visit The Wall?

5 WC: Yeah, I've been to The Wall. That was a very moving experience. I took my
6 youngest son at the time. He was—how old was Sean then? Twelve or thirteen.

7 KC: What did that mean to you?

8 WC: It was great because you're happy. The hard ass that I am, it brings up a
9 little tear. He says, "Dad, you can cry. Don't worry about it. You deserved it." This was a
10 twelve- or thirteen-year-old kid.

11 KC: That must've been very moving I would think for you.

12 WC: Yes, it was. Then I visited it twice. Then with the job I had, too, with the
13 federal government I would have to go to Washington like once a month. I would make
14 my compulsory pit stop over there to see my buddies that died over there and then see my
15 couple of friends see their names on The Wall.

16 KC: Sure. What did you do for the—?

17 WC: I would just go to visit the Korean Memorial and then go about my
18 business.

19 KC: The Korean Memorial is also very moving in a different way. It's haunting,
20 it seems to me.

21 WC: Yes, thank you. Especially when there's a fog out and there's a drizzle. You
22 could put that anywhere.

23 KC: Yeah. My first trip to D.C. my wife and I saw it during the middle of a
24 drizzle and it was just incredible.

25 WC: Yeah. I have a lovely neighbor that lives next door. He's lived next to me
26 for twenty years. He still refuses to go see it. He's got all kinds of medals. He's a real
27 nice old guy. He tells me stories and, you know, I listen to him when we go out for
28 coffee, but Jack, he's excellent.

29 KC: What job did you take with the federal government?

30 WC: Well, that was Homeland Security. That was my last one when I got the
31 cancer I had, but I work for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, believe it or not, in the

1 prisons. I was the warden of a prison. I retired after twenty-five years. I lasted for a year
2 with no retirement. I went to work for Homeland Security until I got sick.

3 KC: Well, looking at the Vietnam War in a larger sense, what do you think it was
4 about for the United States? Why do you think the United States was involved and why
5 do you think that it evolved the way that it did?

6 WC: Kyle, do you want my recollections as a twenty-year-old or as a sixty-two-
7 year-old man?

8 KC: Either one or both.

9 WC: As a sixty-two year old man it was nothing more than a civil war. They had
10 no business being there. I don't know if there was any oil involved, but I'm willing to bet
11 there's some underlying subject. They had to defend—well, after—without boring you,
12 they had—I didn't want to go in with the French, but he gave them all the money they
13 wanted. Kennedy got caught. He just had to go. Then LBJ didn't know why but he still
14 went. He faked up that Gulf of Tonkin Incident. As an eighteen-year-old kid, nineteen-
15 year-old kid it was something I had to do because I was brought up in the Kennedy era,
16 plain and simple. You just trusted everybody. You trust what they say and you do it for
17 God, country, and the church, but now as you look back and you're mature—I won't say
18 it was immoral, but it's a word just below immoral, I would say yeah. That's it.

19 KC: What lessons do you think that we should take from the Vietnam War?

20 WC: Well, we're not—we took them, but we're not practicing them. Stay the
21 fuck out, plain and simple unless you're invaded. I'm sorry I get carried away on it, but
22 there's no reason they should be. If you're in Iraq you go in and you do your business.
23 You get out there. Don't lollygag around and lie to me and say you're looking for Obama
24 or these materials that he could blow the world up with, that's horse shit. Tell the truth,
25 but you won't get it. After this is over the next generation they'll be in a war probably in
26 Dafur or Nigeria or something like that. We never learn. I mean, here where, getting
27 back—now I'm on my soap box. Forgive me.

28 KC: No, that's fine, please.

29 WC: Here's Westmoreland fighting World War II tactics because he completely
30 forgets about Korea. He's trying to stomp out all these massive weapons and he's trying
31 to stomp out some poor country that all they wanted to do was vote. The Americans

1 pulled out in that vote in '54 and Ho Chi Minh made all this. I wish I knew this when I
2 was eighteen. I probably still would've went because Canada is not an option. I like
3 living in Stoneham, but it's all lies. Why do people have to lie? I don't know. That's my
4 soap box. I'm sorry.

5 KC: No, no, no. That's perfectly fine for sure. A question I should've mentioned
6 or brought up earlier given the support and almost the adoration you had as a young man
7 for Kennedy and you talk about the skepticism that you have now.

8 WC: Isn't awful? Isn't it—my youth was destroyed. It sucks, but basically that's
9 how I'm glad. I asked my two sons, I know this is off the charts. Now Billy, who is my
10 oldest, I said, "Would you have gone?" He said, "Yeah." I said to Sean, "Would you have
11 gone?" He says, "No." I said to both of them, "I still love you the same and I'd support
12 both of your methods." I tried to talk Billy out of it, but nothing—if he wanted to go to
13 Canada or wherever I'd support him because I could see the mother, poor Patsy was in
14 shock when Billy said he would go. The reason he said my father went and I've got to go
15 like I went, you know. But with Sean, God bless him, being my youngest one said, "Nah,
16 I'm not going. This is bullshit." He's right. Then Ford pardoned them all so good luck to
17 them, you know.

18 KC: Right. Right. Well, I think that's a pretty good place to end this interview,
19 Bill. Is there anything else you would like to add before we put a close on this?

20 WC: No, I just wish everybody thought the way I thought, but that's the way, you
21 know—for future generations but it won't happen. That's my cynicism showing, but
22 that's—no, I appreciate what you people are doing.

23 KC: All right, well—

24 WC: Anything else I can do just give me a yell.

25 KC: I really appreciate it. I want to ask you to hang on for just a moment. I want
26 to turn off the recording equipment and I'll chat with you for a moment afterwards. This
27 ends the interview with William Cameron.