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**The Vietnam Archive  
Oral History Project  
Interview with Michael Little  
Conducted by Jason Stewart  
29 August 2008  
Transcribed by Cecily Darwin**

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

1 Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech  
2 University conducting an oral history interview with Mr. Michael Little. Today is August  
3 29<sup>th</sup> 2008. I am in Lubbock, Texas, and Mr. Little is joining me from Mission Viejo,  
4 California. Is that correct?

5 Michael Little: That is correct.

6 JS: Okay, all right. Why don't we begin by, if you don't mind, telling me a little  
7 bit of biographical information, when and where you were born, what your parents'  
8 names were, and where you grew up that kind of thing?

9 ML: Yeah. My name is Mike Little and I was born in September 1946 in northern  
10 California a small town called Martinez, which is in the San Francisco Bay area. My  
11 parents are also native Californians. My dad was in the Marine Corps during World War  
12 II. My mother was basically a housewife. Her name is Alta. My father's name was  
13 William. I had a very basic childhood. We lived in the—when I was younger we moved  
14 to another town called Orinda, which is kind of over the hill from Berkeley, and had a  
15 really good—it's kind of a rural area at the time, anyway—and had a great childhood. I  
16 eventually went away to high school in Berkeley to Catholic High School there which is  
17 a little bit different since most of my friends were at the public school in the town that I  
18 was living in. Eventually after high school in 1964 I went into college and I didn't really  
19 know what I wanted to be or what I wanted to do so eventually I dropped out of college  
20 and volunteered for the draft.

1 JS: Okay, all right. Before we get into your entry into the military I would like to  
2 go back a minute if you don't mind and talk about school and your education. It's one of  
3 those questions we just like to ask. What were your favorite subjects in school?

4 ML: My favorite subject, what I eventually graduated from college in was  
5 English, believe it or not. I mean it wasn't something that I—I actually didn't enjoy  
6 reading until I went into the military and maybe that's forced upon you because of the  
7 endless hours of boredom but it became reading and then eventually writing and I haven't  
8 really stopped since. I think my favorite subject in school would have been English.

9 JS: Okay. At the time that you decided, at the time that you decided that college  
10 wasn't for you at that time were you aware of U.S. foreign policy at the time? What was  
11 going on in the world, how aware were you?

12 ML: You know, I must have been aware. I mean this is the mid-'60s and it was  
13 definitely in the news. Of course, we didn't have cable news like we have it today. I must  
14 have been aware but I must not have really taken it personally or paid a lot of attention to  
15 it. When I volunteered for the draft I didn't tell anybody and when I finally told my dad  
16 about it, you know, they basically wouldn't talk to me for a week because he knew what  
17 it meant.

18 JS: Sure.

19 ML: But I—no, I don't think I really knew what it meant.

20 JS: Okay. So when you volunteered for the draft did you know that you would  
21 probably end up going to Vietnam?

22 ML: Like I mentioned, I don't know that it was a conscious thought that, "Oh, my  
23 god. I might end up in Vietnam." Once I was in and at my first duty stations and things  
24 like that, yeah, you thought about it because some of the guys were coming back and  
25 joining the unit that I was in and so then it became more personal. It wasn't like I was  
26 reading the paper every day and keeping up on events.

27 JS: Sure. When your—you mentioned that your dad didn't want to talk to you for  
28 a week after that. When he did finally talk to you did he give you any advice? Did he tell  
29 you what to expect?

30 ML: You know, I have been proud of his military service my whole life, you  
31 know, taking his uniform to school as a kid and hearing all the stories. He was on

1 Guadalcanal so it was a rather famous event in his life. He never really talked about his  
2 experience and he never did until the day he died. In a roundabout way he didn't really  
3 give me any advice. Basically, you know, the typical stuff, don't volunteer for anything,  
4 but really no. It was very personal to him and he just didn't talk about it.

5 JS: Okay, all right. Well, let's talk a little bit about basic training. Where did you  
6 go to basic training?

7 ML: Well, you know, a northern California native I thought I would be going to  
8 Fort Ord down there in the Monterey Coast and loving it but as soon as I said, "I do,"  
9 they put me on an airplane to Seattle Sea-Tac and I ended up going to basic training, my  
10 first time away from home, really, up at a base there in Seattle-Tacoma, Fort Lewis,  
11 Washington, which was so different. The thing that is biggest in my memory is just the  
12 majesty of Mount Rainier. I had never seen anything like that in my life and it was just  
13 one of those things where you would see it each day and just, you know, be mesmerized  
14 by it. I remember sending postcards with that stupid volcano in it. That's probably the  
15 thing that sticks out the most in basic training.

16 JS: Could you tell me just a little about—most people's basic training experiences  
17 are fairly similar, I would imagine, but could you tell me a little bit about basic, just a  
18 typical day?

19 ML: Yeah, you know, it's drilling, drilling, drilling. I eventually became a squad  
20 leader and got a little bit of responsibility, whether I wanted it or not, a lot of physical  
21 training. Luckily it was the time of year—let's see. I went in August so you talk about  
22 early fall so the weather wasn't too bad, it wasn't too hot, I should say. Dusty, I  
23 remember that. By the end of my tour it was getting where the rain started so it was  
24 getting cold and rainy. But mostly, you know, the drilling and then of course the firing  
25 ranges and the, you know, physical PT (physical training), some schooling. Like you  
26 said, it was very typical. I don't remember it being overly difficult. I performed pretty  
27 well in all the physical tasks plus, you know, a skinny kid that was strong. You know,  
28 you meet good friends, you make friends and then, of course, you all get shipped off to  
29 different places.

30 JS: Sure. Okay, and so from basic you went on to advanced training to become an  
31 MP (military policeman).

1 ML: Yeah, that was another surprise. I thought I was going home for leave like  
2 most people do after basic and they said, “No, since it’s close to the holidays we are  
3 going to put you on a plane and fly you across the country,” and of course I had never  
4 done that. So, yes, I went to advanced training at Fort Gordon, Georgia. That’s where the  
5 military police school was. I had never heard of that and, you know, never been in the  
6 South and that was really different just the smell of the place, the screen doors and all that  
7 kind of thing. Being that far away from home I had one of those feelings which is still in  
8 me today and that is I never thought I could get back home. It was so far away and so  
9 distant. You know, airplane travel wasn’t really common. It just seemed like it was so far  
10 away, you know. That feeling of distance, I always remember that.

11 JS: Okay. How did you end up being selected for MP training?

12 ML: I remember taking a battery of tests as you do prior, well, as you go into  
13 basic the first couple of days of getting your uniforms and all of your equipment and then  
14 taking a bunch of tests. I recall on one test, “Would you rather be a chaplain’s assistant or  
15 a military policeman?” and I of course put chaplain’s assistant because I had been an altar  
16 boy and thought that would be an easy job and the next thing you know I’m in military  
17 police school and I have no idea why. Maybe my height, maybe my aptitude. I would  
18 love to be able to say that was it but I don’t have a clue why.

19 JS: Okay.

20 ML: Army’s wisdom.

21 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right, could you tell me a little bit about MP training?  
22 Could you describe it for me?

23 ML: Yeah. MP training is a little bit different than, of course, basic training. They  
24 treated you with a little bit more respect obviously because you are now a regular soldier.  
25 A lot of class work, a lot of work on military procedure, filling out paperwork correctly  
26 and how to handle yourself on the radio. A lot of procedural, like policemen on the street  
27 that you are more familiar with here. A little bit of, you know, judo. Things like that so  
28 you can take prisoners in and not get yourself in deep trouble. Mostly it was schooling, it  
29 was more school work.

30 JS: Okay, what type of classes, could you tell me a little bit more about those?

1 ML: Like I said, police procedure. How to arrest somebody, how to handle even  
2 traffic like major traffic crossings or something, you know, how to get out there and wave  
3 people across, you know. All that kind of stuff.

4 JS: I see.

5 ML: Mostly, like I said, this is what you would expect in any kind of a police  
6 academy type thing.

7 JS: All right. Were there any memorable moments or anything that kind of stick  
8 out in your mind from this, from MP training?

9 ML: Besides the weather being awfully cold. I had never felt cold weather like  
10 that before being from the bay area. The one thing, and this sounds silly, but I remember I  
11 got my first pizza. I didn't ever take a leave and some guys would get a leave on the  
12 weekends and go into town and those of us that stayed behind they ordered pizza to come  
13 in like, you know, delivery pizzas we have today and that is the first time I ever had a  
14 pizza, so I remember that.

15 JS: All right.

16 ML: I remember meeting, for the first time in my life I met three other Littles. I  
17 hadn't never met another Little in my family and we didn't know at the time if we were  
18 related, obviously, but they were all from the South but it was kind of neat having  
19 somebody else with my last name.

20 JS: Sure. Okay. How long did the MP training last?

21 ML: If my memory serves me right it was probably another eight weeks.

22 JS: Okay, another eight weeks, all right. Did you have some leave time there  
23 before?

24 ML: You know, if memory serves me right again I believe I was assigned my  
25 Stateside duty station. I didn't go to Vietnam from Fort Gordon.

26 JS: Okay.

27 ML: I do believe I had some, yes, leave time before I was to report to my duty  
28 station in the U.S.

29 JS: Okay, and where was your duty station?

30 ML: It was a little town outside of Dallas called Duncanville.

31 JS: Okay.

1 ML: Another thing I have never heard of before. It was headquarters for our  
2 missile bases in the area. You know, we used to have those Nike missile bases, this was  
3 like the headquarters for that. We didn't have any missiles on site but, like I said, we  
4 were in charge of a number of areas around that in Texas. The job of the MPs really was  
5 to guard the gate, so we had one gate guard on duty all the time and to go to any trouble  
6 at the NCO (noncommissioned officers') club. It was a dry county and all the locals used  
7 our bar and so the other duty we had was just making sure there was no problems at the  
8 bar.

9 JS: All right.

10 ML: Really rough duty.

11 JS: Right.

12 ML: I had a roommate, too. We had our own rooms, believe it or not, it was really  
13 nice. I had a roommate that actually lived in the same area that I came from so we didn't  
14 know each other before the war but it was kind of nice having a roommate that was, you  
15 know, another Californian.

16 JS: All right. How long were you in Duncanville?

17 ML: I want to say seven months.

18 JS: Seven months, okay.

19 ML: Then he and I both got our orders for Vietnam at the exact same moment and  
20 we actually went to Vietnam together and actually served in the same unit together.

21 JS: Oh, wow. Okay. Well, let's see. So after seven months you received your  
22 assignment to Vietnam. What were your thoughts then when you received—

23 ML: That was the first time I took it seriously. In that unit in Duncanville a couple  
24 of guys had come back from Vietnam so we got a little bit. They didn't have a lot of war  
25 stories or anything but we got a little bit of what you might expect. I mean, Vietnam was  
26 so different for everyone no matter where you were. For the first, when I got those orders  
27 I thought, "Wow, this is big." I mean, this is something I didn't count but—it wasn't like  
28 a shocker but it was, you know, one of those things. This other guy we knew got orders  
29 so that became a big deal then.

1 JS: Okay. That brings up a question I meant to ask you about your MP training.  
2 Your officers that were training you at MP school, had they been officers that had come  
3 back from Vietnam?

4 ML: I don't have any memory of that.

5 JS: Okay.

6 ML: There may have been a couple of NCOs, sergeants and whatnot, that did, but  
7 I don't have a recollection that they gave us a lot of, "Hey, here is what you better watch  
8 out for in Vietnam," like you see in the movies where infantrymen were being trained by  
9 veterans that had come back. "Watch out for this. Watch out for that," or, you know,  
10 "Take care of business and pay attention," but I don't remember that much in MP school.  
11 As an MP going to Vietnam I thought it was going to be, and I don't want to use this  
12 word lightly, but I thought it would be kind of a safe thing. You know, it's not one of  
13 those—I knew I wasn't going to be pounding the jungle, at least I hoped, because, you  
14 know, things could change once you get there.

15 JS: Sure.

16 ML: My visions of MPs were based upon what I had seen in movies and what I  
17 had been trained to do. Everything I was trained to do had nothing to do with what I did  
18 in Vietnam. So, I was expecting a little bit easier go of it.

19 JS: Okay, all right. Can you tell me a little bit about your trip over to Vietnam and  
20 all?

21 ML: It was long, of course. The one thing that sticks out in my memory, of  
22 course, I went with my buddy which was great but one thing that sticks out to me is we  
23 refueled in Japan, I forget the name of the airbase there, but getting off the plane you  
24 would go into a little holding area and get a snack for, you know, about an hour while  
25 you are waiting for your plane to get refueled. And on the other side of the room were the  
26 veterans coming home and they were—they had a totally different look, as you can  
27 imagine. I always remembered that look and thinking to myself, "I wonder if I will ever  
28 get to be one of those guys."

29 JS: Right, okay. Did that—

30 ML: I finally did, you know, when I came home we stopped in Japan and I got to  
31 be sitting on the other side of the room looking at the new guys.

1 JS: Yes, sir. Did that change the tone of the flight for the rest of the way over  
2 there?

3 ML: Yeah, it did. The difference was so radical. I mean not just in clothing  
4 because they were more disheveled and they didn't have the nice Stateside clothes on or  
5 anything but they weren't in their jungle fatigues but they were disheveled and they had a  
6 look. I always thought, "Boy, that is the look I want to have."

7 JS: Okay. Well, did you—after stopping in Japan did you go straight from Japan  
8 to Vietnam?

9 ML: Yeah, we landed in Cam Ranh Bay and then spent a few days there in the in  
10 and out whatever they called it, the transitory process of getting orders and all the rest of  
11 that stuff. The biggest memory I have of that experience was my buddy and I taking a  
12 shower together in the facility and we were the only ones in the shower except for a half a  
13 dozen or so hooch maids, you know, Vietnamese women that had been hired as cleaners  
14 and stuff like that, and they were in the shower cleaning things and washing clothes and  
15 here we are taking a shower. I felt so self-conscious because, you know, you're taking a  
16 shower and you have all these ladies around. I was like, "Geez, are we supposed to be  
17 here?" Plus we don't know them and they are all dressed in black and the only thing we  
18 have heard is, you know, the bad guys are wearing black. "Geez, are these good guys or  
19 bad guys?" That is how stupid you really feel.

20 JS: Upon arrival at Cam Ranh Bay what was your first thoughts when you stepped  
21 off the plane?

22 ML: Well, it is like you've heard a million times and it is so true it is just the heat  
23 blast that you get. You know, you are in an air-conditioned plane and they open the door  
24 and, holy smokes. It was really a stifling heat and then riding in those buses with mesh on  
25 the windows and you could hear noises in the far distance. It is just so radically different  
26 in northern California or Fort Gordon, Georgia, or Duncanville, Texas, it just looks so big  
27 and so vast and so many things going on. Luckily you are with a bunch of other people  
28 that are just as stupid as you are so you feel okay about that but you just feel really stupid,  
29 so much to learn.

30 JS: Right. You said you were at Cam Ranh Bay for just a couple of days.

1 ML: Three days, two or three days, yeah. Luckily my buddy and I got orders for  
2 the same unit because we didn't know for sure. Things can always happen at the transit  
3 base so we got orders to fly up to Pleiku, which we did.

4 JS: How did you spend those three days in Cam Ranh Bay? What did—

5 ML: You know, they put you on details whether it was KP (kitchen patrol) type  
6 duty or, you know, I don't think they had latrine duty. They might have. I don't  
7 remember. But just, you know, a little besides taking tests if there was tests to be taken or  
8 shots or whatever you just were kind of menial details to keep you occupied. We would  
9 try to dodge some of the details, you know. They would ask for a formation, you know,  
10 and you were supposed to fall out in formation so they could pick guys to do, you know,  
11 pick up the area, you know, just little things.

12 JS: All right. Then you said you went on to Pleiku to join the 504<sup>th</sup>.

13 ML: Yeah, B Company of the 504<sup>th</sup>.

14 JS: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit—before we get into the 504<sup>th</sup> and the  
15 mission of the 504<sup>th</sup>, could you tell me a little bit about Pleiku and the base?

16 ML: Pleiku, of course, was the central hub of the Central Highlands, very  
17 strategic. When I first got there we were housed at a, our unit was housed at Camp  
18 Holloway which was a famous camp up there named after one of the first Americans that  
19 had been killed in the war in that area. I forget his first name, obviously his last name was  
20 Holloway but that is where I spent my first month or two. Pleiku was a definite, like I  
21 said, the definite center of the area. I forget which—I think there was a corps  
22 headquarters there and there was 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division was there. Air Force, of course,  
23 had a big air base there and there was a hospital there. It had everything. It was like the  
24 center. It was along kind of a junction between Highway 19 which ran to the coast and  
25 Highway 14 that ran up to Kontum and Dak To and places north towards Cambodia so it  
26 was a jumping off place for a lot of operations.

27 JS: Okay. All right. Could you tell me a little bit about your own quarters there?

28 ML: Yeah, I hated Holloway, of course. I got there in the monsoon season and it  
29 is wet and wet and wet and Holloway as I recall it was kind of on a slope. You are always  
30 trying not to fall on your butt in the mud. We had hooches which were just dirt floor or  
31 wooden floor with just mud everywhere. No nice memories of Camp Holloway

1 whatsoever. The bunkers outside, guys would relieve themselves in so when we would  
2 have incoming at night time or alerts at night time and you had to dive into a bunker for  
3 safety, of course, you didn't really want to because it was so putrid inside there.  
4 Everything just seemed old and not rusty but, you know, falling apart sort of like a prison  
5 cell at Alcatraz. All the weather just had been eating it up for so long it was like  
6 crumbling. It was also the headquarters or the home of our helicopter units up there. A lot  
7 of our guys on their days off would ride door gunner on the helicopters. Luckily we  
8 didn't stay forever at Holloway. We moved to a new camp.

9 JS: The name of the new camp?

10 ML: We moved to a camp on the other side of Pleiku called Camp Schmidt. I  
11 have no idea who that was named after but we had wooden barracks, two-story barracks.  
12 I mean it was the difference between night and day. We even had hot water eventually in  
13 our showers. We had actually, you know, plumbing.

14 JS: Right.

15 ML: It was, like I said, it was new and we were the first inhabitants so it was nice

16 JS: All right. Could you describe—tell me a little bit about the 504<sup>th</sup> MP Battalion  
17 and what its—go ahead.

18 ML: The 504<sup>th</sup> is a very famous old unit that fought during World War II and it  
19 got deactivated then, of course, got activated again. B Company was in Pleiku and they  
20 also had C Company in An Khe and A Company, I wanna say in Nha Trang. I might be  
21 wrong. You know, you keep moving. Over time they would move companies or even  
22 headquarter units, mostly though they were in the highlands. B Company kind of had the  
23 same types of responsibilities as any other MP company, you know, had responsibilities  
24 for town patrol where you wanted to make sure the safety of the American soldiers off  
25 duty, that kind of thing. That is what I expected to be doing is that kind of policeman  
26 activity. You also had prisoner, you know, take prisoners from one camp to another  
27 typically the enemy prisoners not our own guys but enemy prisoners.

28 JS: Sure.

29 ML: Then you had your typical motor pool people and your clerks and you had  
30 your provost marshal's office that some of our guys would support that duty. What I did  
31 not expect and I had never had heard of before and had no training for was when I went

1 in the morning after we got there my buddy and I who flew together walked into the  
2 orderly room and the guy says we have got two slots open, one in town patrol and one on  
3 highway. I had no idea what highway meant. My buddy said he will take town and I said,  
4 “Okay, I will take highway.” That is when I found out there is a whole other aspect of  
5 military duties in the Highlands and that was to patrol the roads.

6 JS: All right. Can you tell me a little bit about that mission of patrolling these  
7 roads? What was it?

8 ML: What we did, and it was all learn as you went, it was learn as you go, it was  
9 taking the lessons from a couple of the old guys that, you know, had been there months  
10 before you and just adapting. What they did is they realized they needed all these  
11 convoys coming from the coast bringing all this material for the war to this very strategic  
12 area. The enemy, of course, would try to stop those convoys and intercept them and blow  
13 them up and attack them and all that so they said we need to have besides convoys  
14 needing to toughen up with their gun trucks, etc., we need to have military police out  
15 there not just providing security because we also had tanks and armor and all that but to  
16 make sure that down trucks are taken care of and looked after and just all the kinds of  
17 things you can imagine would happen on an artery bringing all this material up, not to  
18 mention the civilian traffic intermixed with it. Our duty was to outfit a jeep. You took  
19 your own regular jeep and put armor plating around it so our motor pool guys would just  
20 weld these things together. Throw an M-60 machine gun in the back on a turret so it  
21 could swivel. So you had a driver, another person in the passenger seat, and a machine  
22 gunner, so basically three guys in a jeep with a radio and a machinegun and off you went  
23 every day. We would patrol typically in two jeeps, two jeeps would be one patrol and we  
24 would have half a dozen or more jeeps out on a fifty mile stretch of road going back and  
25 forth all day long as the convoys would come and go. As they would get ambushed or  
26 break down or run into civilians, you know, anything that could happen and did happen.  
27 That was basically our mission. I learned from the old guys and then when they went  
28 away and I became an old guy I tried to pass on lessons learned.

29 JS: Okay. What was your particular role?

30 ML: Originally I was a driver.

31 JS: Okay.

1 ML: I didn't have any experience on the M-60. I could have had that job, I  
2 suppose, but I became a driver and I was very proud of my—I don't think I lost anybody  
3 with my driving, although I came close a few times. Then eventually because, you know,  
4 after you are around for a while—typically out on the road you would have an NCO in  
5 charge, a sergeant, maybe a buck sergeant which is a three-stripe sergeant would be in  
6 charge of the road. Eventually most of those guys disappeared and you didn't have many  
7 of them so I was a Spec-4 and I became in charge of the road my last three months, I  
8 think because of my longevity. I had been out there and seen everything and they didn't  
9 have a bunch of sergeants where they could throw them out there. Me and another fellow  
10 who both were Specialists 4<sup>th</sup> class, you know, we ended up running the highway. When I  
11 say running the highway most of my time was Highway 19 which was Pleiku east  
12 towards the coast. We had about a fifty-mile stretch of road before our sister company  
13 would pick up their responsibility, you know. We would meet them at a certain point.  
14 Each day we would go out around seven in the morning, the tanks would clear the road of  
15 all the mines hopefully that were laid the night before and we always hoped that they  
16 found them all. Of course, they didn't but that is the way it was. We would get a  
17 notification around 7:30 in the morning that the road was cleared and we would be the  
18 first ones on it. We would go about half way in our area of responsibility, have breakfast  
19 while the convoys eventually reached our area.

20 JS: Okay. What do you remember, if you don't mind telling me, about your first  
21 brush with combat, your first encounter with the enemy?

22 ML: It is hard to remember the first time. There were so many different ambushes  
23 and sniping incidents and stuff, mines. I guess the first one was an ambush and the tanks  
24 were assaulting the tree line. You know, we didn't want to get too close in with the tanks  
25 but we were on foot. I remember just being up like an incline, a little hill or rise, if you  
26 will, looking at the jungle thinking, "My god, how could you see anybody?" You know,  
27 at the time we didn't have our M-16s yet. We had M-14s so I laid down some fire but I  
28 didn't know what I was shooting at and I don't think the tanks did, either. So I kind of let  
29 the tanks and APCs (armored personnel carriers) do their business. Most of the ambushes  
30 except for a couple of major ones were hit and run. They would come down and shoot a  
31 few rockets into the trucks or whatever and then bail out because they knew that

1 eventually they would be in trouble. That is probably the first time I remember somebody  
2 out there might be looking at shooting me but I sure as hell couldn't see them. That was  
3 the thing of my whole tour. I don't think I ever saw a bad guy except prisoners or dead  
4 guys. I never saw a bad guy who was trying to hurt me. They were always invisible.

5 JS: How often would the enemy ambush your units on these missions?

6 ML: I have got to make it clear here they never ambushed us. This was my belief  
7 and this is what carried me, carried my fear every day was they weren't after me. If they  
8 were they could have had me anytime they wanted us. Yes, we were well armed but we  
9 were so open and they could just wait and they knew where we were going to be and we  
10 went places we shouldn't be. We were easy targets but we weren't the targets. I always  
11 believed it was the convoys. It was the material and all that stuff which they could never  
12 really stop, there was too much of it. I didn't feel—unless I was in the wrong place at the  
13 wrong time which that almost happened on occasion, you know, I really wasn't—if I got  
14 hammered in an ambush it was probably my own fault of being too close to it when it got  
15 started.

16 JS: So they would generally let you guys pass by and wait for the convoys.

17 ML: They did on various occasions, yeah.

18 JS: Okay.

19 ML: My guess is, and all my trips back I have never talked to an enemy soldier  
20 that was in the area, but my guess was they always knew where we were, they watched  
21 us. They probably thought we were more of a, just like a fly on their back, you know,  
22 nothing that was really going to cause them a lot of pain. Not that we didn't inflict pain  
23 but I just don't think that they—they had other things to worry about. There was a lot of  
24 tanks and, like I said, armored personnel carriers. I could call up Phantom, you know,  
25 jets. I could call up Cobra helicopters. I could call up everything there was to come to our  
26 aid and if I didn't do it the tank units would so I mean we had a lot of firepower on the  
27 road, not to mention the convoys' use of gun trucks and quad fifties, four .50 caliber  
28 machineguns on a truck. I mean that got to be pretty dangerous themselves.

29 JS: Well, with the ambushes on the convoys would those be a daily occurrence?

30 ML: Not daily. You would have quiet time typically during the rain. The rainy  
31 season nobody seemed to want to come out. I would say weekly something would happen

1 whether it is mines or hit and run. Major ambushes only happened a couple of times  
2 while I was there. Or you would have a large force, say, twenty to fifty enemy soldiers  
3 attacking a convoy blowing up two different ends of it so they could assault the middle,  
4 that kind of thing.

5 JS: Okay. The enemy were they—I know you said you never saw them so you  
6 may not know—were they local VC (Viet Cong), NVA (North Vietnamese Army)?

7 ML: We were always told they were NVA and all the ones that I saw later on  
8 were NVA. We used to—this is a little side note—we used to patrol the road, Highway  
9 14, Pleiku to Kontum and that was taking a convoy up in the morning and bringing it  
10 back at night so it was a very structured environment unlike Highway 19 where we're  
11 kind of like on our own doing our own thing. Convoy duty on Highway 14 was very  
12 structured. We took one up in the morning and brought it back in the afternoon. In the  
13 middle of my tour they took that responsibility away from us and gave it to the 4th  
14 Infantry Division MPs whom we were friends with. Well, on the first week that they were  
15 on that duty they got ambushed, that convoy got ambushed and we lost a few MPs from  
16 the 4<sup>th</sup> Division along with about a dozen truck drivers. It was just one of those instances  
17 where, you know, you think about, "Well, hell. That could have been us," you know, up  
18 there.

19 JS: Sure.

20 ML: It's just chance that we weren't.

21 JS: All right. Generally when one of these ambushes would take place, you  
22 were—I guess what I am trying to get at is was your unit always on call for support?

23 ML: Absolutely. Yeah, we were the first ones there. Well, it depended on where it  
24 took place.

25 JS: Right.

26 ML: If it happened to be close to where a tank was that was a bad move but  
27 typically we would be the first ones there or if not closely thereafter. We will probably  
28 get to this later, but we were in a Montagnard village building a house and the ambush  
29 was right next door to it. At first we thought we were the ones being ambushed. We  
30 weren't. It was the convoy that was right next door to it so obviously we were the first  
31 ones there. It just depended on where it took place and where our patrols were.

1 JS: Your area of responsibility on Highway 19, about how big of a—how many  
2 miles?

3 ML: About fifty miles.

4 JS: About fifty.

5 ML: Like I said, it was east from Pleiku and it went over the famous Mang Yang  
6 Pass. Now, that is famous because the French were wiped out there in '54 prior to Dien  
7 Bien Phu. They lost Groupe Mobile 100 up on that mountain and we would visit their  
8 graves as often as we could. It was well up off the road up the mountain and it was where  
9 we kind of escaped the noise and smell of the road, you know. We could look down on it.  
10 It was probably something that was stupid to do because like I told if anybody wanted to  
11 take out some MPs that would have been an easy job.

12 JS: Okay.

13 ML: Then our area of responsibility went past the Mang Yang Pass another few  
14 miles to a checkpoint where we would meet our sister company and they would take it  
15 from there all the way into An Khe and then past.

16 JS: All right. You mentioned a little bit about how the enemy would work and  
17 their ambushes. Could you elaborate on that? Could you tell me a little bit more about  
18 that and—

19 ML: Yeah, they would use—depending on the size of the force and what their  
20 intent was, a major ambush would be something with rocket-propelled grenades, B-40  
21 rockets, whatever, in one location of the convoy and then the same activity at another  
22 location so that they would cut the tail and cut the head of a convoy so they could focus  
23 on the center of it. Hopefully they didn't catch some gun trucks or something else very  
24 nasty in that center part because that would cause them trouble. But they would cut off  
25 the tail and cut off the head and then, of course, the trucks instead of trying to—they were  
26 always taught to keep on moving. Of course, they couldn't if a truck or two were blown  
27 up. Highway 19, I call it a highway but it is a narrow, barely passable one lane each  
28 direction so it is not a highway. There is not a whole lot of room to maneuver off the  
29 road. Of course, you go off the road its real imperil. They would box up this number of  
30 trucks and then assault with, you know, AK-47s and so on. You know, you wonder what  
31 is really the point of it. They would kill some truck drivers, wound a bunch of people and

1 they might lose a bunch of people to but what were they going to do, you know? They  
2 couldn't really steal the trucks.

3 JS: Right.

4 ML: To get the stuff off the trucks if it was even something they could use it, you  
5 know, takes so long to do that we would have reaction forces there so quickly, you know,  
6 they couldn't afford to loot, for example. You know, they weren't going to be stealing ice  
7 cream off a reefer truck or beer off a flatbed, you know. What are you going to do with  
8 it?

9 JS: Right.

10 ML: I used to see—just think, you know, the futility of that kind of activity now,  
11 the harassment stuff where they would have mines in a hit-and-run activity which they  
12 did a lot. I can see that just as a way of pestering us and letting us know they are still  
13 there. I don't really see how their ambush activity, if you will, really accomplished  
14 anything.

15 JS: All right. How would you, based on that then, how would you evaluate their  
16 fighting ability?

17 ML: I have no doubt and, you know, I have read a lot since the war but I have no  
18 doubt that the fighting capabilities were excellent. You know, they also I am sure had  
19 tremendous motivation. You know, it just—you know, you are there at the time but you  
20 are not really being educated or you don't really think in those terms so a lot of what I  
21 know or what I can tell you or things that I have read and learned after the war. At that  
22 time you are still just trying, you know, to get through one day at a time, you know,  
23 counting them off like everybody else does you don't really pay attention to—you know,  
24 you hear Charlie is bad, you hear Charlie owned the night and all of that but you don't  
25 see it firsthand. We were out there at night many times. One of our jobs was to close the  
26 road down at night which means the last convoy goes by and you sweep behind it  
27 towards home to make sure there is no down trucks. Well, if there is down trucks you are  
28 there until they are fixed. We were out on the road until midnight, one o'clock many  
29 times and you really sense the fear then of being at night but you always in the back—  
30 like I told you before, I never believed we were targets. Well, I didn't think they knew  
31 where we would break down so I always thought they weren't that organized where they

1 could attack us, you know, effectively not knowing that that is some place they could  
2 practice on. It was definitely an odd feeling to be out there in the dark.

3 JS: Sure. How often did you have these types of—

4 ML: Oh shoot, you know, I don't even know. We would have a lot of  
5 breakdowns. Whether I was out there until midnight I don't think it was weekly, probably  
6 monthly. It got your attention, though.

7 JS: Sure, and would you—

8 ML: That was one thing, you know, being on the highway platoon or highway  
9 patrol, whatever you want to call it, we were called Roadrunners and we had patches and  
10 all that kind of thing and a lot of *esprit de corps*. We would always get in late. What I  
11 mean by that is the mail call would be over and the chow hall would be closed so it was  
12 one of those things, you know, you were proud of what you were accomplishing. Later on  
13 people did keep the mail room open, later on they did re-open the mess hall so they could  
14 feed us but it was one of those things, you know. We had a dangerous job and a lot of our  
15 guys in camp really didn't understand that.

16 JS: Right. (Coughs) Excuse me. On these night missions whenever you are  
17 working, trying to get the broken down trucks up and running again did you ever have  
18 contact with the enemy then?

19 ML: No, luckily. That is why I am able to talk to you now. What usually happens  
20 is we would call their units or their units would make their own radio contacts and they  
21 would get these things called a wrecker and the wrecker is just a great big tow truck but it  
22 had a lot of capability. It was huge and those kinds of folks could either repair the truck  
23 and get the heck out of there or they would hook it up and tow it out of there. At the same  
24 time we would call in as many tanks and so forth as we could to kind of create a  
25 perimeter for us. It would have been a very tricky business trying to mess with us in that  
26 kind of a circumstance. Like I said, that from everything we knew the enemy had always  
27 planned everything so carefully.

28 JS: Right.

29 ML: This was not something they could plan for, you know, a certain break down.

1 JS: Did you have other missions besides patrolling the roads whenever the  
2 convoys came through and helping to get the broken down trucks off the road were  
3 there—

4 ML: Yeah, that was our main thing. We would go up and down the road. A lot of  
5 truck drivers, of course, if you can feel for them and eventually I had a lot of respect for  
6 those guys because they are loaded in a cab trying to drive a truck up these roads which  
7 were dangerous in their own right let alone having enemy guys with trouble in their heart.  
8 They would break down and, of course, they would be afraid. Many times we would see  
9 them broken down trying to make repairs, flat tire, whatever it was, we would hang with  
10 them just to kind of let them know they are not by themselves.

11 JS: Sure.

12 ML: Of course, we would call medevacs in for wounded or dead or call graves  
13 registration because choppers wouldn't come in to take out the dead. Occasionally, you  
14 know, when civilians would get involved, you know, whether we killed a civilian by  
15 mistake or an accident on the road we would get involved in that. Most of the time we  
16 would let the convoys do their thing. We weren't out there trying to give them speeding  
17 tickets. They had speed limits and I never once, I am proud to say, ever gave a ticket even  
18 though we had to carry ticket books with us, if you can believe that. Occasionally we had  
19 commanding officers, I won't speak ill of them, but nobody dared come out on the road  
20 but a couple of times they dared coming out in a helicopter trying to tell us that such and  
21 such truck was speeding, they were going past the limit. You know, we have to fake it out  
22 and say, "Yeah, we will take care of it."

23 JS: Sure.

24 ML: We just, we basically were out there protecting each other but, you know, if  
25 any of the convoys needed help we were there for them.

26 JS: Was there a typical protocol or a way to typically respond—the way that your  
27 unit would respond if a convoy came under ambush?

28 ML: This gets back to the training thing. Two things that I wish we would have  
29 had would have been training in that because we always call you to talk about, "Okay,  
30 what do we do? We have never had this training." You know, you come in like the *Rat*  
31 *Patrol* that was an old TV series and that is about as much training as we ever got. That is

1 what we looked like and some of the tankers would call us the Rat Patrol. We would have  
2 scarves flowing in the wind and all that kind of stuff. Yeah, the protocol was get there as  
3 fast as you can but after that, do you leave the machine gunner on the jeep? Well, no, you  
4 get him off but who carries all the ammo? Those kinds of tactical things we just winged  
5 it. It kind of depended on the situation. I mean we had patrols actually caught in the kill  
6 zone of ambushes and so, you know, we never were trained: What do you do then? Well,  
7 you just keep shooting until you don't have any bullets left. You know, I mean there was  
8 no real protocol to it. No real, you know, "Hey, let's go out training today." We did have  
9 training on, "Okay, how do you shoot a .50-caliber machinegun?" Okay, great, got that  
10 training but I am never going to do it. There were times they gave us some LAW (light  
11 anti-tank weapons) rockets to carry and those were nice to have. They were easy to use  
12 but you know how often do you get to use them? The biggest regret I have and I think it  
13 has been corrected in today's military is we didn't have a medic. We had a couple of  
14 Vietnamese policemen who could help interpret for us but we didn't have a medic. We all  
15 had our own little first aid pouches but no medic. There was so many times when we  
16 could have bandaged somebody or had somebody with more expertise than a bunch of  
17 MPs out there who had the basics in medical care. I thought that was one thing that was  
18 really missing.

19 JS: Sure, yeah. That is definitely surprising, I would have automatically assumed  
20 that there would be a medic with you.

21 ML: Nope, didn't have a medic. The closest medic—out on that road there was a  
22 place called, fire base called Black Hawk, a very famous fire base where the artillery and  
23 the armor units were and that was the closest medic. If I had somebody, you know, a  
24 friend or later on Montagnard friends that needed taking care of I would haul them up to  
25 the medics there but we had nothing with us.

26 JS: Okay. Now, were you always escorting American military convoys or did you  
27 work—

28 ML: Yes, occasionally there would be a South Vietnamese convoy but for the  
29 most part it was American. We didn't have much to do with the South Vietnamese, to be  
30 honest with you.

31 JS: Did they have their own support like a counterpart to you?

1 ML: No, no. I mean occasionally you would have a Korean convoy come down,  
2 you could have, you know, various other countries but they basically took care of  
3 themselves.

4 JS: Okay, all right. Well, you said you didn't have too much interaction with the  
5 South Vietnamese then, right?

6 ML: Not too much, no. Except for our own—like I said, on our patrols we would  
7 have a policeman or two to help interpret. There was at one point in time there is a river  
8 out there called the Ayun River and the enemy had blown the bridge up so we had a  
9 temporary one-lane bridge over the river. We would have a patrol on each side to, you  
10 know, stop traffic when a convoy was coming one way or stop traffic when it was  
11 coming the other way so that they could get across the bridge. For a while the  
12 Vietnamese had a unit out there at the bridge for security along with some Americans as  
13 well but they had a big Vietnamese unit out there. Of course, boys being boys, you know,  
14 this happened about a week before I got there, we would take bullets and take out the  
15 round and take out the powder and put the round back in and put the powder on the top,  
16 secure it in the dirt and light it and it would be like a little rocket. If you used a tracer it  
17 had a tail on it. Well, we would shoot these little rockets at the Vietnamese on the other  
18 side of the road and evidently they got angry one day and a firefight broke out between  
19 the Americans and the South Vietnamese guarding the bridge.

20 JS: Wow.

21 ML: With those kinds of things eventually they took the South Vietnamese unit  
22 off the bridge and it was all American units.

23 JS: From the contact that you did, from what little contact you did have with them  
24 I wanted to ask you a little bit about your estimations or your thoughts on the South  
25 Vietnamese.

26 ML: Yeah, and it was all hearsay and so I am sad to say that all we ever heard was  
27 how bad they were, but that was hearsay. I never saw them in action. I went to their aid  
28 when they were under fire and saw nothing but, you know, exemplary behavior but I  
29 didn't fight with them. Our interpreters were kind of cowboys, you know, they were just  
30 watching out for themselves. They were okay but I didn't really have any—everything I  
31 thought was just stuff that we had heard. The whole thing of guys holding hands, you

1 know, and it was just so different to us we were ready to believe whatever. You know, we  
2 were trying to get by, we were calling everybody slang terms that we probably shouldn't  
3 have been. That was sort of embedded in us by the older guys. It wasn't something we  
4 learned from firsthand experience. My best Vietnamese friend there was my hooch maid  
5 and she was a wonderful lady. She was a mother and she and I became close friends from  
6 Camp Holloway and then she moved to Camp Schmidt afterwards. I always would like to  
7 know whatever happened to her but she was genuinely a friend. I mean she took me and  
8 another buddy into her home, for example, which was kind of unheard of to have dinner  
9 with her family. It was just, you know, one of those things but that is really the only  
10 experience with Vietnamese that I had.

11 JS: All right, that of answers my next question was your opinion on the  
12 Vietnamese civilians.

13 ML: They just seemed to get in the way. It is not their fault. I mean, shoot, they  
14 are just trying to live and support their families but, you know, you think about this: you  
15 are in the middle of a war, you don't know who the good and the bad guys are, you don't  
16 trust anybody and you know everybody is in the way. In the middle of an ambush you  
17 might have a big bus go by or the Lambretta filled with people, it wasn't their fault.

18 JS: Sure.

19 ML: Things just happened, you know, among them. I had no animosity toward  
20 them. Like I said, I just didn't know many Vietnamese. There was one incident that I can  
21 tell you where I was truly moved and that was at an accident not far from Pleiku. It was a  
22 bad accident and I am terrible at paperwork and never filled out a report so I called in the  
23 town patrol people to come help me handle the paperwork which they did but they only  
24 did because they said that you guys have got to stay there because they were afraid to  
25 come out. We stayed and the gentleman came up to me and said, "Would you come to  
26 my house? My father would like to meet you." Well, that's different. Me and two other  
27 guys loaded for bear because we don't know who to trust and what to trust and went into  
28 this guy's house. It was the only time I went into a Vietnamese home out on the road. The  
29 gentleman was an older gentleman and he had lost his son, an ARVN (Army of the  
30 Republic of Vietnam) son and he wanted to have tea with us. I remember sitting in this  
31 nice modest home with this old gentleman who did not speak English so we didn't have

1 anything to say and here me and these two guys loaded to the teeth, dirty as can be, you  
2 know, been out on the road all day long and I felt out of place.

3 JS: Right.

4 ML: Like shame on me, you know. We finished our tea and went on our way.

5 JS: Sure. These accidents that you mentioned, was this a fairly common  
6 occurrence accidents between—

7 ML: Yeah, and they could be really bad. I mean you could kill ten or twelve  
8 people at one time, you know, if you had that many people crammed into a Lambretta,  
9 Vietnamese, if it ran into one of the American trucks it could get very bad out there. We  
10 lost two MPs out there to that. I was the last to see them alive. Two guys came out on a  
11 joy ride from our headquarters company, from our headquarters platoon and on their way  
12 back they ran into a bus and they were killed. It wasn't just Vietnamese that were getting  
13 killed in accidents. I would say we lost more people to accidents than to military action.  
14 That is just a function of a very bad road, very big trucks, and small civilian vehicles.

15 JS: Sure, sure. What would the typical, if there is such a thing, American—the  
16 response, how would say if there is an accident between an American truck and  
17 Vietnamese civilians how would it be handled?

18 ML: We would have to call out somebody. We wouldn't handle it on our own, we  
19 weren't really geared for it. We would call out somebody much higher than our authority,  
20 a provost marshal or I don't know what the name of the unit was that would come out and  
21 investigate those things because they would have to pay reparations of some sort. We  
22 always knew that the families would be paid so much if they lost a person or lost cattle.  
23 We had one MP go kind of crazy on us and kill a bunch of cows and, you know, those  
24 kinds of things had to be investigated and it was really above us, we weren't burdened  
25 with those kind of investigations. We had to stay on the move.

26 JS: Okay.

27 ML: We would have specialized folks that would come out. Like I said, I am not  
28 sure what office they would be under if it was the provost marshal or whomever but they  
29 would come out and investigate and then, you know, follow up. We never knew what  
30 happened afterwards.

1 JS: Okay (coughs) excuse me. All right, you mentioned in the veterans'  
2 questionnaire that you were there, of course, I know by the dates that you were in-country  
3 but for the Tet Offensive was it—did anything big happen where you were?

4 ML: Well, we thought it was. I mean, of course, we had troubles on the road and  
5 at times we couldn't go out during the height of it but we would get intel every night and  
6 intel would say we are going to have these human wave attacks, they are going to come  
7 right down Highway 19 and come right through here at Camp Schmidt. We would spend  
8 I think it was two or three nights out of our cozy cots. We were out in a little ditch lightly  
9 armed I might say, you know, M-60s and M-16s, sleeping on the dirt. This was the only  
10 time I felt like a grunt but sleeping in the dirt wondering if these human wave attacks  
11 with the civilians out in front of them coming down were ever going to take place and it  
12 never did. The big battle itself was in downtown Pleiku. We could hear it and smell it and  
13 see the choppers and all but we were not asked to go in to do anything about it. The 4<sup>th</sup>  
14 Infantry Division had good intelligence prior to the Tet Offensive and they were probably  
15 as ready as anybody was. At the time we did have a provost marshal's office downtown  
16 in Pleiku and it got hit. A lot of ours, not a lot but a couple of guys got slightly wounded  
17 from that. A good friend of mine, I won't give you his name, but a good friend of mine  
18 was in town that night with his girlfriend staying at her house when the Tet Offensive  
19 broke and he opens the door and the Viet Cong and NVA are running through Pleiku  
20 wreaking havoc and ready to attack the police stations and other things like that. They see  
21 him and they just fire a rocket at him and it blows up at his feet. He is lying the street  
22 dying and his girlfriend pulls him in and saves his life. That was one of the little side  
23 stories from the Tet Offensive.

24 JS: Right.

25 ML: Some of our guys, like I said, who were kind of caught in it downtown  
26 because of the provost marshal's office had to fight their way out of that situation but for  
27 the most part 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division and the other units, you know—we would drive by the  
28 soccer field where there would be maybe 100 or so bodies of the enemy lined up on the  
29 soccer field for all the photographers to take their pictures and stuff. Really, the Tet  
30 Offensive came and went. We also at that time were still patrolling Highway 14 to  
31 Kontum and Kontum was hit really hard. If you go to Kontum you would see all the

1 explosions of the buildings and the bodies out on the streets. We had a unit in Kontum as  
2 well as a detachment and they lived at the MACV (Military Assistance Command,  
3 Vietnam) compound and they were attacked. Nobody was killed. A dear friend of mine  
4 got hit in the chest. I tell him he was the only one who was ever hit in the chest by a .50-  
5 caliber bullet and lived. The bullet had been fired from such a long distance it hit the wire  
6 tumbled and hit him in the chest flat. It knocked him about twenty feet backward. For the  
7 most part as far as B Company is concerned, I won't speak for the other companies  
8 because they did have some other activity, but B Company really didn't have a whole lot  
9 going on.

10 JS: Okay. How long did the—I know this wasn't a part of your unit from what  
11 you just mentioned—but how long did it last in the area, how long did it—

12 ML: The Tet Offensive?

13 JS: Yes, sir.

14 ML: You know I remember it as around three, four days before everything kind of  
15 got cleaned up, very tense after that but that is my recollection of that, you know.

16 Highway 19 got reopened, Highway 14 was out running convoys again; five days or less.

17 JS: Okay.

18 ML: As I said. I believe and I think I have read that the 4<sup>th</sup> Division did take the  
19 intelligence seriously and prepared rather you just might not have.

20 JS: Were these primarily—again this is not, I am asking questions that didn't  
21 necessarily (pertain to) your unit but was this primarily North Vietnamese troops?

22 ML: I think so, yeah.

23 JS: Okay.

24 ML: If memory serves me, you know. I couldn't tell.

25 JS: All right. Well, before we move on to the development of your relationship  
26 with the Montagnard children, which is something I really want to focus on, but before  
27 we do that are there any other particular missions or incidents that stick out in your mind  
28 that you might be willing to talk about?

29 ML: You know, there was so many and it was hard to pick one or two. Each one  
30 brings its own memory and feeling or emotion.

31 JS: Sure.

1 ML: I don't know that I can—I have the deepest respect and regard for the guys I  
2 served with. Sure, there was always a bad, you know, somebody doing something they  
3 shouldn't be doing away from home but for the most part I was really proud of the guys I  
4 served with. Did we do everything right? Probably not. I can't think of one special  
5 incident. You asked me, you know, if you were ever caught in the wrong place at the  
6 wrong time. A real quick incident that I will share with you and that was at the top of the  
7 Mang Yang Pass.

8 JS: Okay.

9 ML: From a truck hauling cement bags I must have lost some off the side of the  
10 road, actually on the road, so we stopped two jeep gun patrols to get the cement bags off  
11 the road. We were also taking a guy from Pleiku to our sister company's place on the  
12 road so he could continue his journey to the coast. So I left one unit there to get the  
13 cement bags off the road and I said I will take the guy down to the checkpoint so he can  
14 get on his way home and meet the guys to take him down the road. As we neared that  
15 checkpoint down the road all of these air explosions, you know, are going off, all these  
16 explosions around. I am thinking, "Well, that must be the tanks down there working out,"  
17 but it wasn't. It was a mortar attack. I always remember I was just a few minutes late or  
18 otherwise I would have been in the area where all the mortars were hitting, were hitting  
19 the South Vietnamese unit. I always thought if it hadn't been for those cement bags, you  
20 know, what would have happened.

21 JS: Sure.

22 ML: You have a lot of things like that where you think afterwards, "Oh, man. I  
23 was just two seconds away from that," or just a few yards away from this. One day a  
24 convoy commander is driving down the road in his jeep and there is an NVA soldier or a  
25 Viet Cong hundreds of yards away in some mountain somewhere and shoots a mortar  
26 round into the air and it happens to land underneath the gas tank of the guy driving the  
27 jeep. You know, those kinds of incidents, you know, just the randomness of it.

28 JS: Sure. Well, by the time that you—I know from reading your short stories I  
29 know that your interaction with the Montagnard children really had a big effect on your  
30 life. I don't want to put words into your mouth but by the time that you met them what  
31 was your mindset with the developments and how things had been going in Vietnam?

1 ML: It wasn't so much how things were going in Vietnam as how much things  
2 were going inside me.

3 JS: Right.

4 ML: By the time I had—by the time I was lucky enough to develop this  
5 relationship you mentioned I had really started—I had landed in Vietnam thinking I was a  
6 pretty good guy, you know, a good little Catholic boy that did most of things they were  
7 supposed to do. Obviously joining the Army wasn't something my dad wanted me to do  
8 but a pretty dutiful son and I always considered myself an upstanding, you know, telling  
9 the truth type of person. But by the time I got into about eight or nine months of my tour I  
10 seen and done things that I just lost sight of who I was.

11 JS: Sure.

12 ML: I am not talking about major atrocities but the small things. Sometimes by  
13 non-action, you know, you feel guilty about things. I just was not—I wasn't pleased with  
14 who I was. It wasn't like I had to say, "Okay, tomorrow I am going to be better," I mean I  
15 just knew I was going downhill and I just knew it could get worse. You find out that  
16 everybody has this capacity within themselves for the good and the bad, that is what we  
17 always hear. Well, I never had seen it and I kept seeing it, witnessing what other people  
18 were doing our side and their side and then getting caught up in doing it myself and I just  
19 didn't like that.

20 JS: Right.

21 ML: The children became something that was an option or I just kind of fell into  
22 it. If you ask me I will tell you how that happened but that became my redemption and I  
23 basically quit the war.

24 JS: That was—I know from reading your, from your short stories—thank you.  
25 That was really what I was trying to get at with the questions, so thank you. But that does  
26 bring up I guess the question of how did you come about this relationship with the  
27 Montagnard children?

28 ML: I mentioned the Ayun River and the two checkpoints on each side guarding  
29 that one-lane bridge, that temporary one-lane bridge. Well, we spent a lot of time there as  
30 you can imagine because that is where our guys, they would stay there all day long  
31 monitoring that bridge and so we would hang there with them and have lunch, you know,

1 a C-ration lunch and C-ration breakfast. Well, a Montagnard village was only a few  
2 hundred yards from there up the hill and the children who were too young to work in the  
3 fields would hang down there, I would say twenty of them, they would hang by that  
4 checkpoint hoping at the end of the day we would have some leftovers to give them.  
5 They were just there, you know, they didn't bug us. They were very, seemed respectful.  
6 We had always heard that the Montagnards were a very honorable people and not  
7 someone to mess with but someone to respect. Once again, it is not out of a personal  
8 experience I had with them, it was what we were told to learn.

9 JS: Right.

10 ML: The children, though, would sit out there and just wait and hang amongst  
11 themselves. The first time I saw Montagnards during my tour I thought, you know, it's  
12 *National Geographic* times. There is no way in the world you can communicate with  
13 people that are living in the Stone Age, you know, that kind of thing. Stupid young  
14 American. Lesson number one. I was wrong on that one. You just don't think—you think  
15 the distance, the chasm between the two cultures is just too wide to ever bridge so for  
16 many months you just look at, they were just part of the scenery until one day you  
17 know—the story I love to tell is my friend and I we just had a boredom sitting there all  
18 day long, you know. Month after month and you see so much and eventually you get  
19 bored so much. You picked up a little rock and threw it and hit a little kid behind the  
20 head, behind the ear when he wasn't looking. It wasn't something hurtful but it was  
21 something you would do with your own children to tease them.

22 JS: Right.

23 ML: Of course, they were too frightened to do anything back. I mean we are  
24 loaded, you know, more firepower than they have ever seen in their lives. "Oh, my god.  
25 These big Americans." I don't know what they had been told about us, my god, because I  
26 am sure that VC had lived in their villages. Until, you know, a couple of days go by they  
27 get tired of getting hit in the back of the head. All of a sudden I got one in the back of the  
28 head. It is too kind of, too much like a short story but that kind light—the light went on  
29 when that thing hit me in the head. All of a sudden you start to learn how to treat each  
30 other as it is just another human being and get to know each other and get to learn about  
31 each other and that was the wonderful part about it. Once that started there was no going

1 back. Luckily at the time, like I mentioned to you earlier, too, this was a part in my tour  
2 where I didn't have anybody telling me what to do and I was in charge of all the patrols.  
3 If I wanted to go swimming with the kids or go build them a house or do whatever it is or  
4 just hang with them or just, you know, write down in my little book phonetically what  
5 their language was so I could learn it. Or go up to their village and trade with the people  
6 and meet the parents and all that stuff. I was able to because I was in charge and my guys  
7 were gracious enough to tolerate me.

8 JS: How did the parents of these children respond to his developing relationship?

9 ML: Very nervous at first because, you know—here again, I was so naïve I didn't  
10 know if my relationship would put them in harm's way. I am just lucky that it didn't.  
11 That was pretty stupid of me. It eventually got the village chief killed. I was naïve and  
12 maybe the bad guys didn't care, I don't know, but families at first were a little bit shy.  
13 One family in particular only had the mom and she had four kids and, of course, I  
14 eventually adopted them all but they didn't have a father. He had died already and they  
15 lived in the poorest shack in town. That was eventually the family whose home we built.  
16 What really got them nervous was when I asked to bring them to camp with me to spend  
17 the night. They had never seen electricity or hot water, experienced that. Of course, we  
18 even had a television so I mean that was going to be a big deal. I not only had to get their  
19 okay with it, the parents, but I also I had to get our commanding officer okay with it and  
20 eventually I did. I got them their TB (tuberculosis) shots and all, whatever tests and  
21 whatever else they asked me to do I got that all done. Taking them into camp was a big  
22 deal. Once I got them back home and they told everybody what they saw and, of course,  
23 nobody believed it. It is just like going to the moon and saying you saw whatever. The  
24 trust even grew stronger and then, of course, we started doing more and more with the  
25 kids all the time coming into camp. We would sneak them in the camp and it was  
26 wonderful. The parents came around. There was also a time when we started to wonder  
27 about it. We'd pick the kids up at the village in the morning on the way down to that river  
28 checkpoint and most of the time they would just run out and jump in the jeeps and away  
29 we would go and we would all have breakfast together. Occasionally they would not  
30 come running to the jeeps. Well, after once or twice that happening and an ambush taking  
31 place that morning we got to thinking, "Okay, the parents know the ambush is coming."

1 There was some intelligence there that they know to expect something bad that day and  
2 they didn't want their kids to be with us.

3 JS: Sure.

4 ML: We would say, "Okay, let's see today they are not running to us. Okay, be  
5 ready. Lock and load. Something is going to happen." Eventually the kids overrode the  
6 parents. The parents eventually had no say in the matter. They ran every day. It didn't  
7 matter what happened. The parents took a little winning over but, you know what?  
8 Especially when we started building the house because it took so long to build that sucker  
9 they got to know us pretty well, all the people in the village did.

10 JS: You have mentioned building this house a few times. Could you tell me a little  
11 bit about that, how that came about?

12 ML: Yeah, what happened was like I told you this family had no father and they  
13 lived in a cardboard shack. Montagnard houses are usually built very nicely with bamboo  
14 and so on and it is off the ground and they are very neat and orderly homes. Well, there  
15 wasn't, it was just a mess and she had these four young kids. I think the oldest one might  
16 have been seven or eight. We had a part on our road not too far away from that area  
17 called Dead Man's Curve and obviously it got its name for what it was like. It was a bad  
18 turn in the road and a lot of guys died there. One truck driver was hauling lumber and he  
19 had killed himself there at Dead Man's Curve and me and another guy looked at each  
20 other and said let's build—the little boy's name was Kenh—let's build Kenh a house. We  
21 stole all of the lumber that was after, you know, we took care of the poor truck driver but  
22 we stole all the lumber. Hauled it, you know, jeep after jeep load up to the village and  
23 stored it next to their house. One of the amazing miracles of the war was about a month  
24 or two later when we finally get around in getting all the materials together to build this  
25 house the lumber was still there. In most places in Vietnam things would disappear but  
26 not there, so that is where the lumber came from. One or two of the guys in my unit had  
27 been, you know, craftsmen in his civilian life, brick layers and such, so they had the  
28 expertise to get this thing off the ground and we got a lot of supplies, nails and cement  
29 and other things from Black Hawk fire base in our own unit. We spent about a month or  
30 month and a half building this house and it was a daily occurrence that we would go in  
31 there and spend an hour or two while we are waiting for the last convoy or whatever

1 working on the house. The villagers would all sit around and watch and laugh. They  
2 never had seen hammer and nails before. It wasn't out of bamboo, it was out of wood but  
3 it still looked like their house. The village chief told us where to put it and what direction  
4 to face it and they had a big celebration after we built it.

5 JS: Okay. How many of the guys in your unit became involved with the kids like  
6 you?

7 ML: Two other guys attempted it as much as me but nobody as much as me. But  
8 two other guys were involved and had their, maybe three other guys. They each had their  
9 favorite kid, if you will, where mine was maybe one or two or three but it was the whole  
10 group. They would have—it wasn't a mascot type thing but they would have two or—  
11 each one of these guys would have a favorite child that they would always make sure  
12 they got an extra can of C-rations. We would bring them in at night time or whatever. To  
13 some degree two or three other guys that started a relationship. Did they continue that  
14 after the war? No, and they don't continue it to this day. I don't know that anybody took  
15 it or felt it as deeply just because of who I was and where I was at that time that I did. But  
16 like I mentioned earlier, everybody tolerated me. It wasn't something where I was putting  
17 our guys in harm's way. Often when we, almost all the time that we went into the village  
18 and every time we worked on the house I would keep one or two machine gunners on the  
19 gun. You know, you want to trust people but, hey, you know, it only takes one mistake.

20 JS: Sure, right. Do you know how these children or the Montagnards in general  
21 were generally treated by other Americans or how they were looked at? Do you know  
22 anything about that?

23 ML: I can tell you just about—our village there, most of the Americans I think  
24 were good at heart but you always had some that had the devil in them and I think they  
25 just didn't see human life the way I wish they had. There were some truck drivers and I  
26 bet you there might have been some MPs I don't know about but there was some truck  
27 drivers who would drive up that road and take that C-ration can they had on the front seat  
28 and fire it, throw it like a hard ball at the kid, not to the kid. One time it cracked open the  
29 little boys head and, of course, they all called for me because I am the one they can talk  
30 to and I go up there and he has got this huge gash in his forehead. He tells me what  
31 happened and this is once again a chance where I could have had a medic but I didn't so I

1 took him to the fire base to the Black Hawk Fire Base and they stitched him up. Well,  
2 you had those kinds of incidents but for the most part, especially the guys I served with  
3 and probably because of me at the time but they all treated the Montagnards with a great  
4 deal of respect. We had had no reason not to respect them, they had never lied to us. I  
5 mentioned that ambush that took place right next door to the village while working on the  
6 house. Well, they had been all out there watching us working on the house. They didn't  
7 know about the ambush, either. I did ask about it later on but they said, "No, we didn't  
8 know about it, either," and I trusted them.

9 JS: Right, right.

10 ML: For the most part I didn't see the—the American interaction, you know, they  
11 are just driving by and there is not a whole lot of getting to know people.

12 JS: Sure, okay, all right. You mentioned being able to speak with the children and  
13 trying to learn the language. How successful when you were there in Vietnam as a  
14 soldier?

15 ML: Pretty successful. To this day I can still say the same phrases to them and we  
16 all laugh because that is all Dad knows.

17 JS: Right, right.

18 ML: That is all he has been saying for the last forty years. But, no, we have our  
19 little repertoire. Unfortunately it hasn't really expanded because of space. When I was  
20 there we would have like *Outdoor Life* and different magazines and I would point to  
21 things and tell them how to say it in English and they would tell me how to say it in their  
22 language. A couple of the boys were really good students and really were good at  
23 learning and at teaching. I wrote everything down in a black book phonetically, phrases,  
24 words for things, stuff that we would use every day. Of course, their names I wrote  
25 phonetically and none of it was written correctly. They had a written version of "Angels  
26 We Have Heard on High," that wonderful Christmas hymn and it was in their language  
27 that the French missionaries had given them and they taught me to sing in their language  
28 in Bahna and I still have it. Those kinds of things where we could sing a song like that  
29 together or just, you know, try to pick as many things as we could so that we could  
30 converse because there was no interpreter. We didn't have a Montagnard interpreter and  
31 they didn't speak Vietnamese.

1 JS: If you don't mind me asking, you seemed to focus a good bit on your  
2 relationship between two boys. If I can pronounce their names right—I will probably get  
3 them wrong—but Kenh and Prot.

4 ML: Perfect.

5 JS: Could you tell me a little bit about how the relationship with those—how it  
6 became special with you with those two boys in particular.

7 ML: It seemed to be—those were the two boys I hit in the back of the head so  
8 they were about five or six years old. They seemed to be the leaders, if you will, if they  
9 had such a thing, and they were the most intelligent. Prot was light skinned which always  
10 made me wonder if he didn't have a little French background in him, highly intelligent. I  
11 always thought he would be a piano player where again Kenh was so strong and such a  
12 powerful guy. I always thought he would have been the athlete if there had that chance.  
13 He just seemed to have the spirit. I don't know what it was that made them stand out and  
14 more than the others but they loved me and vice versa. You know, they were the first two  
15 kids we took into camp, got the permission for. Of course, they would come every time.  
16 After that I didn't ask permission, I just kept bringing them in. I don't know why they  
17 were my favorites. I mean I knew them all and I loved everybody but they seemed to  
18 stand out. Prot's father was an alcoholic so he had a rough life. Kenh, his father was dead  
19 he was one of the little kids who just had a mother. They were just special and I would go  
20 swimming with them every day in the river, me and about twenty kids while the tanks  
21 were watching and barbed wire is up river so they can't float mines down on us and  
22 things like that. They were just special and I don't know why it was them, maybe it just  
23 had to be somebody, but they were.

24 JS: All right. Well, I want to continue discussing this relationship because I know  
25 it continues to this day, but before moving onto your relationship with your Montagnard  
26 family, before continuing onto that today I would like to talk about leaving Vietnam and  
27 the end of your tour and then get back to your relationship. But when did you receive  
28 orders to leave Vietnam?

29 ML: This is my recollection.

30 JS: Okay.

1 ML: I am on the road. I knew my time was getting short, guys that I knew had  
2 already gone home. I was on the road and most guys left the road with a month to go and  
3 they would go on fence duty or guard duty, if you will, at night time just to keep them off  
4 the road. I refused to do that. I didn't want to leave the road so I was on the road. I knew I  
5 was getting short and they call me up on the radio and say, "Hey, your orders came in.  
6 This is your last day." You could imagine what that feeling is like. You have been  
7 counting 365 days and they say this is your last day on the road you are going to be  
8 processing out in the next day or two. I am at the top of the Mang Yang Pass, you know,  
9 waiting for that last convoy to go by so we would sweep in behind it thinking this is the  
10 end of my day. I have got another gun jeep with me and all of a sudden on the opposite  
11 side of the pass, the side where I wasn't going to be going, all hell breaks loose. All these  
12 explosions and, my god, I am thinking, "What the hell is going on?" There was a pump  
13 state—they had built a pipeline, if you will, if you can believe this, all the way from the  
14 coast to Pleiku pumping gasoline and every night the enemy would blow it up and we  
15 would fix it. There was pump stations along the road, pump stations where they would  
16 pump that thing up the hill, I guess. I don't know but there was a lot of Americans  
17 stationed there and occasionally they would get hit so that is what I thought was probably  
18 happening. All of these explosions and all my guys of course lock and load and ready to  
19 get down there. Right? I hesitated. I all of a sudden realized I am going home tomorrow  
20 or pretty soon thereafter. Do I want to go down there? They looked at me, you know, and  
21 they called me by my name I finally looked up and chambered a round and said, "Let's  
22 go," and so we went down there and luckily we didn't get hurt. That was how I found I  
23 was going home and that was my most embarrassing time when I almost said, "No, I am  
24 not going to the ambush," or whatever it was, "because I am going home."

25 JS: Sure.

26 ML: They weren't and they wanted to go and so we did.

27 JS: Okay. As you learned—after this when you had learned that you were going  
28 home how did that affect your thoughts about—well, did you think a good bit about the  
29 children and what would happen to them?

30 ML: During my last couple of months I had also started a clothing drive so my  
31 family, my parents and a bunch of other guys' families and parents sent box load after

1 box load of clothes over there so we were constantly handing clothes out in the village. I  
2 always said it was the best dressed Montagnard village in Vietnam. On the way back that  
3 day I stopped to say good-bye to them. One thing, and if you read any of my stories, one  
4 thing I didn't know how to say back them or maybe it was just because I was too macho,  
5 is that I didn't know how to say "I love you" When I said good-bye to Kenh and Prot I  
6 just shook their hand. They looked at me and they knew what it was about because they  
7 had seen other soldiers go home, you know, they don't come back. Home is kind of  
8 obscure to them but they know they don't come back. I just shook their hand and put my  
9 head down in the jeep and closed my eyes, unhooked the radio and left not fully  
10 understanding how that would affect me later. You are so wrapped up in yourself at the  
11 moment you just can't wait to get out of there. I mean that is what you have been  
12 counting for and you didn't expect a relationship to build up. I just basically shook their  
13 hands and said good-bye and left and never came back out on the road.

14 JS: Right.

15 ML: Once I did get home I spent a year trying to go back. I wrote and applied  
16 with every NGO, non-governmental, every religious, every you name it type of  
17 nonmilitary organization to take me back and nobody would take me. Because I was  
18 going to go back and be with the kids.

19 JS: Okay, so again not to put—

20 ML: But what I did when I got home—I am sorry to interrupt you—but what I did  
21 when I got home some of my guys were still there, obviously, so I would write letters to  
22 them and I would write letters phonetically for them so that they could go out on the road  
23 and tell the kids, you know, my name back then was Tee, short for Tee Tee which is short  
24 for Little, or pidgin English for little. Anyway, "The Tee, here's his words to you, here is  
25 his pictures for you," you know that kind of thing. They would take pictures of the kids  
26 and send them to me so I was able to stay in touch for maybe, let's call it six months after  
27 I got home that way. Of course, I would keep sending clothes and stuff like that. Once my  
28 guys rotated out and eventually even our unit rotated out of there and there was  
29 absolutely no contact.

1 JS: Okay, all right. Again, like I said, I don't want to put words into your mouth  
2 so would you say that you pretty much had mixed feelings leaving because of your  
3 relationship?

4 ML: Yeah, it was one of those things. It is going to be too simple sounding to you  
5 but, you know, in the Montagnard culture bracelets are a big thing. One thing I got right  
6 away from a Montagnard boy named Djanh is a silver bracelet in '68 and I still wear it  
7 and I have never taken it off. It is one of those things I used to wear more than one, I  
8 would have, you know, three or four on and I would jingle. When I got home those  
9 bracelets acted as a reminder and, like I said, I have never taken it off. I took some home  
10 movies while I was there, about nine minutes of home movies from a Super 8 movie  
11 camera that one of my guys got for Christmas so I have film of them. When I got home I  
12 went out and bought—not a projector. I couldn't afford that. But I got like a splicing  
13 machine, a cheap little splicing machine that had a little tiny viewer on it and I would just  
14 run the film through it just so I could see them. I am honored to have—a privilege to have  
15 that as a memento and I also—for Christmas my parents sent me one of those little small  
16 reel-to-reel tape recorders. When the kids were in one night I taped them so I have their  
17 voices on tape, talking to them and singing that song I told you about and stuff like that.

18 JS: Right.

19 ML: Not a day went by that I didn't think about them for the twenty-six-year  
20 separation that we had. They were always a source of hope for me. When I knew I was  
21 the best I was and a time when I was the worst I was.

22 JS: Okay. What type of reception did you receive upon arriving at home between  
23 your family and the public?

24 ML: Troubled, that's probably a common theme. I had trouble leaving Vietnam. I  
25 got bumped off a couple of flights at Cam Ranh Bay so it took me three days and I was  
26 about ready to shoot somebody, you know. I hadn't slept in three days. I had a girlfriend  
27 when I went to Vietnam and we had kind of broken up during my tour but, you know,  
28 when you hang onto something when you get home you think, well, maybe there is  
29 another shot at it. My biggest regret was I didn't go home. We were living in Sacramento  
30 at the time. I didn't go home. I went to San Francisco and she picked me up and I went to  
31 her parents' house. I realized right away, whoa, that was a big mistake because she was

1 actually living with somebody else. My parents came down the next day and picked me  
2 up. I feel bad I didn't go straight to their house. Be that as it may, you know, coming  
3 home—I came home a different person in that I was very much independent. My plan  
4 was not to live with them in Sacramento but it was to go back to Oakland where I had  
5 worked before and get myself a little apartment. You know, nothing major but, heck, I  
6 was twenty-one years old at the time. I just thought that was a natural thing to go. Well,  
7 they thought something different they wanted their little boy back. They thought I was on  
8 drugs and they didn't talk to me for a week when I joined the Army. Well, it was more  
9 like a couple of months during this time. They thought I was a drug addict or just crazy,  
10 you know. Why would I want to go live in Oakland? Why wouldn't I not want to live at  
11 home with them and do what they wanted me to do? So I left and it was a real strange  
12 relationship, if any at all, between myself and my parents for six months after I got home.  
13 Later on I tried college and they seemed to warm to that and we kind of got back  
14 together. Then I dropped out of college after a week and they just kind of, you know,  
15 accepted me, I guess, at that time. I sold everything I owned, got two suitcases, got on a  
16 Greyhound bus to go see the guys I served with because I missed them. At least my dad  
17 came to the Greyhound bus station that time and didn't get angry with me.

18 JS: Right. Okay.

19 ML: I don't have any recollection of bad feeling toward other civilians or  
20 anything like that.

21 JS: Right, okay.

22 ML: A few minor incidences in Oakland but nothing big. You know, going to a  
23 party and people saying, "Oh, you're a veteran," or you know, Vietnam veteran; a couple  
24 of odd looks and this and that and the other but nothing I can point to as what we have  
25 heard about other people getting spit on and stuff like that. I don't have any recollection  
26 of that.

27 JS: Sure, sure.

28 ML: The first thing I did when I got out of the Army at Fort Lewis, when I came  
29 home from Vietnam I also rotated out of the Army at the exact same time. The first thing  
30 I did was take a taxi down to downtown Seattle and get civilian clothes. My haircut  
31 probably gave me away but I got civilian clothes.

1 JS: Okay, let's see. So overall would you say that you had a good bit of difficulty  
2 readjusting?

3 ML: Yeah, yeah. I don't know how much I want to blame on Vietnam. Most  
4 people say I may have been crazy before I went to Vietnam, but Vietnam surely put a  
5 hiccup in the whole process. I still didn't know what I wanted to be. The trip going back  
6 to look for all my buddies didn't turn out as well, either. They were going on with their  
7 lives and they weren't in the same place as I was anymore so it was some good and bad  
8 in that whole experience. I got home and I guess I didn't know what I wanted to do. I  
9 ended up driving for the Red Cross. I would take cancer patients to the hospital for their  
10 treatments but that was voluntary. So I just kind of—didn't really have a whole lot of  
11 focus.

12 JS: Okay, all right. When you got back, when you returned to the States did you  
13 have more time to serve in the military or were you out and finished?

14 ML: I was finished, yeah. You know, you are on inactive reserve or whatever they  
15 call it but, yeah, I finished. I actually got out about ten days earlier than my due date. I  
16 got a break for about ten days.

17 JS: Okay. All right.

18 ML: I just celebrated my 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary. I got back on August 5<sup>th</sup> of '68.

19 JS: Okay. Before we get back into this whenever you reconnected with Vietnam  
20 and reconnected with your Montagnard family could you tell me a little bit about life  
21 after Vietnam, your career and how life has gone after Vietnam?

22 ML: You know, it was evolutionary. It was never a plan. I went back to junior  
23 college and there was a special program at the time. I was also working in the school  
24 district in Sacramento as a security guard at a high school. There was a program that it  
25 would take so many Vietnam veterans and put them through college, you know, if they  
26 wanted to become a teacher. I tried that and eventually graduated from college but I  
27 didn't really want to be a teacher. I think to be a good teacher you have to want to be a  
28 teacher. I kind of drifted, not drifted much, but my dad was in the food industry and had  
29 said one day to me—you know, I never thought about following my dad or anything—he  
30 said, "There is an opening with Coca Cola. Would you like to have an interview?"  
31 because, you know, he dealt with them. So I said, "Sure," not knowing what the heck that

1 meant. I did and I ended up working twenty-six years for Coca Cola as a like business  
2 analyst, if you will, a lot of number crunching and so forth. A number of different  
3 positions but that was pretty much my role mostly in northern California and stint at  
4 headquarters in Houston and a stint in southern California. After twenty-six years I  
5 eventually retired from Coca Cola. It was kind of evolutionary, it wasn't that I always  
6 wanted to be A, B, or C and then that is what I became but it kind of evolved.

7 JS: Okay. One thing I meant to ask you before moving onto that was did you  
8 follow the war fairly closely after you departure?

9 ML: Yeah, I did, not fanatically as far as the media but I could not get enough to  
10 read book-wise. I became an avid collector. This is the day before computers so I worked  
11 with a lot of book stores and agents, you know. I was trying to find "Can you get these  
12 via the post?" you know, via regular mail, you know, trying to find the books, what books  
13 are being written about it. There wasn't even a bibliography so I couldn't get enough  
14 books and to this day I am still the same way. I don't care how many I have read, my  
15 collection is, say, 700 or whatever but I could not read enough. It was like I had to know  
16 what just happened to me, to the country, to there, you know, everything. It didn't matter  
17 what the topic was. I really appreciated the novels more than the others but I just couldn't  
18 read enough. So, yeah, I followed the war but I also became a student of it.

19 JS: Right, okay. What—

20 ML: I still have the newspaper from the day that Saigon fell.

21 JS: That was my next question I was going to ask you. What were your thoughts or  
22 what do you remember about that day?

23 ML: Yeah, just sadness, you know. All the waste on everybody's part, numbness  
24 to it. It was really sad to watch it, you know.

25 JS: Sure. Did your adopted children come into your mind on that day?

26 ML: Well, of course. You know, the Americans left probably in '73 and, you  
27 know, my unit had left that area long before that so I mean the door had already sort of  
28 closed but once the country became what it became that door was—for me I thought  
29 there was no way it was ever going to be reopened in my mind. I had always felt this  
30 because my children would come to me in dreams for all these years and I would say I'm  
31 going to see them is going to be in dreams or maybe if I die and get lucky enough I will

1 be able to see them after that. There was never any hope and there was absolutely no way  
2 of getting information about that area of the country.

3 JS: That brings me up to reconnecting with them. Can you tell me how that came  
4 about, how you came about being able to reconnect with them?

5 ML: Yeah, when the embargo, U.S. embargo was lifted in 1994 some travel agent  
6 that I had dealt with before called me up and said, “Hey, the Highlands are open. Would  
7 you want to go?” God, my heart jumped out of my throat and I said, “My god, yes.” I got  
8 one of the guys I served with, one of my dearest friends from New York, he and I got  
9 tickets in 1994 and just armed with some old photographs and no hope, really, we went  
10 back together. A newspaper man accompanied us to do the story and, like I said, pure  
11 luck and lining up of a few stars and a few miracles, the photographs proved to be what  
12 was needed to find them and we did. They were—most of them were still alive living in  
13 the same general area pushed back more into the jungle but we were able to reconnect.

14 JS: Okay. What condition were they in? Basically how had they been treated over  
15 the years by the government or did you—

16 ML: Like I said, they were moved into the jungle area so all the prime real estate  
17 along the road was taken over by either Vietnamese hamlets or communities or rubber  
18 plantations. There is a lot of plantations there now. You don’t really see the Montagnard  
19 villages like you would have in the ’60s. They moved into the jungle. Subsistence  
20 farmers, no electricity, no running water, tough life, everything is controlled. They  
21 weren’t restricted on the number of kids they could have. Most Vietnamese were  
22 restricted to two. I am sure because of their high mortality rate they were not restricted.  
23 They need people to work in the fields. I saw a little bit of signs of some education  
24 maybe going on but that was ’94 and things have changed a lot since then, obviously.  
25 Depending on who you talk to, I don’t want to get into a political discussion about what  
26 is going on in the Highlands today but just my family the people that I see that I deal with  
27 because through letters and visits and so forth their lives seem, albeit it difficult, seem to  
28 be improving each year. As we become part of their lives kind of giving them some of the  
29 tools to better themselves they seem to be doing it. Life is still tough. There is uprisings  
30 over there. I have had a couple of family members put in jail and they are out now but  
31 they are in poor health. I mean, there is a lot of things that need to be fixed but they are

1 able to go to school. Of course, they need to learn Vietnamese. That is the dominant  
2 culture but often times they can't go all the way through school or meet their potential  
3 because of conditions at home; a parent needing them to work in the fields, that is still  
4 very much a part of the culture.

5 JS: Okay. On that first trip—go ahead. I am sorry.

6 ML: I was just going to mention the difficult part has been since 2001 when they  
7 had the first major uprising in the Highlands, the Central Highlands, by the mountain  
8 people. That is really put the Vietnamese on edge, the authorities. Up until 2001 I could  
9 go out and visit them in their villages. I could also receive phone calls from them, they  
10 would make collect calls. Since that uprising it has really made things very difficult. We  
11 have never been to the villages, back to the villages and we communicate now mostly  
12 through letters, the mail. I have some Vietnamese friends in Pleiku who are able to  
13 actually email me with some of their letters.

14 JS: All right. I would like to go back, if you don't mind, a little bit to that first trip  
15 back when you were able to finally see them again and finally reconnect after all those  
16 years. Could you tell me a little bit about, just a little bit more about your own feelings?  
17 How did it feel to finally be able to do this to reconnect?

18 ML: It was one of those situations that was totally unplanned but, like I said, we  
19 were armed with those old pictures. It turned out an old Vietnamese gentleman who lived  
20 by that bridge I keep telling you about on the river said, "Yeah, I remember those kids."  
21 Can you believe it? You know, he, "Yeah, I remember them." He pointed towards the  
22 jungle. Well, I wanted to take off running but my guide and my buddies knew we have  
23 got to do this the right way. We drove out there, found this village and people just came,  
24 you know. There were no people in village at the time. It was day time they were out  
25 working but news travels fast. The first Americans in twenty-six years are here. They all  
26 come running into the village and I pass the pictures around. You know, I am talking to—  
27 you know, my little bit of Bahnar language and this is really neat but I haven't seen any  
28 of the kids I knew yet. All of a sudden out of the crowd a woman shrieks and she is one  
29 of the little girls in the picture. So we have our wonderful reunion and I say, "Are Kenh  
30 and Prot alive?" And she says, "Yes, but they live in the village kind of next door," if you  
31 will, a ways away. So we set up a time for the next day for me to come out and be

1 reunited with my kids. So that is what we did in this person's house. My buddy and I  
2 went out there and we went to the house and of course nobody was there yet. But we are  
3 sitting there and I had a cup of tea with the girl who had recognized herself in the picture  
4 waiting for something to happen. Of course, the whole village is there, you know, people  
5 clamoring to get a view and the next thing you know that mass of people parts and in  
6 walks Kenh and Prot and two other of the children I knew. I probably wouldn't have  
7 recognized them if I hadn't known they were coming but since I did know they were  
8 coming I did know who they were. It had been twenty-six years and that reunion I don't  
9 think I had ever cried that hard.

10 JS: Sure.

11 ML: Both of us. I had always wondered if the kids would remember me, let alone  
12 the things that we talked about and did and all the rest of it. They had the clearest  
13 memory and they knew everything, remembered everything, the old songs, everything. It  
14 was quite a reunion. We were able to spend the whole day together and a little bit of the  
15 next. That's how it all happened.

16 JS: Okay. How many times have you been back to see them?

17 ML: Oh, eight times back.

18 JS: Okay.

19 ML: I have not been allowed to see them on each one of those trips back, we have  
20 had a few disappointments. My son and I went back in 2004 and we were in Nha Trang  
21 on the coast getting ready to go to the Highlands the next day to spend days with our  
22 family up there and the second protest took place and coincided with our trip. The  
23 Highlands were closed down immediately and, of course, they thought I had something to  
24 do with the whole thing. We had a little trouble getting out of the country. We have had  
25 instances like that since that 2001 protest and now the 2004 where it has just been  
26 difficult to get permission to go see them anymore.

27 JS: So when was the last time that you were actually able to see them?

28 ML: In 2006 I visited. I went back by myself. My wife was tired of going back  
29 and being disappointed and I didn't want to take my son through it again so I went back  
30 alone in 2006. I thought I had all the prior governmental approvals. Our ambassador had  
31 helped me get into the country. I wanted to, you know, spend three days with the families

1 not necessarily in the villages, maybe in Pleiku but that is okay. When I got there the first  
2 thing was all the local authorities made me go into a meeting with them and what they  
3 eventually came up was that they granted me one day with twenty. The family right now  
4 is 182 people strong and he allowed me to see twenty so I had to make a list of twenty  
5 people that I would get to see for one day. That is what we had, we had a reunion of one  
6 day with twenty people.

7 JS: Goodness.

8 ML: I tried to go back in 2007 but was denied. Once again I got arrested coming  
9 out of the country in 2006. They got me for fraudulent, not fraudulent, but filling out my  
10 Visa application incorrectly. I always put tourist. I just figure I am a tourist, but they said,  
11 “No, you are not a tourist because you help so many people. You are a humanitarian. You  
12 filled it out wrong.” Therefore I had to sign a confession to that extent, I am sure that is  
13 why I am not able to get in now.

14 JS: Well, are you—I am sure this is probably a dumb question—but are you still  
15 actively trying to get back over there, I am sure?

16 ML: Yeah, I am. I mean I take it one step at a time. A couple of other  
17 organizations that I might be able to go back under their umbrella, if you will. I am going  
18 to be retiring soon and I am going to have more time to focus on my quest to get back and  
19 to see them again. It is so difficult to get the authorities to believe you and to trust you. I  
20 have to try to find a way to make in their best interests to allow me back in. I mean, it’s a  
21 pretty good story. So, yeah, I am still actively trying and not a day goes by that I don’t  
22 miss them and think about them.

23 JS: Well, I know that you mentioned in the veteran’s questionnaire that you hope  
24 to retire there one day. Is that probably not an option now?

25 ML: You know, it was until 2001 and my wife and I had even looked at property.  
26 That dear friend of mine who got blown up during the Tet Offensive and the girlfriend  
27 saving his life actually has married a Vietnamese woman now and built a house in Hue. I  
28 have always been jealous of the fact that he was able to do that. Of course, he doesn’t  
29 have the Montagnard connection which is the killer but he has got a house in Hue and I  
30 am so envious. Yeah, that was always my target, at least to spend half the year there each

1 year but it looks like that is probably not, unless something happens here drastically it  
2 doesn't look like that is going to take place.

3 JS: Let me ask you some broader questions about the war and about your  
4 experiences. One other thing I wanted to ask you, and this is a fairly broad question so  
5 you can answer it any way you like. Overall how would you say your relationship with  
6 your Bahnar family has affected you? I mean, I know it has had a great effect on you but  
7 could you put that into words?

8 ML: A couple of comments there. I hope I can remember them both. I go to  
9 various functions or have been a part of different activities or exhibits or reunions or  
10 whatever it may be, interviews by the media and they always say, "Do you have  
11 closure?" You know, this thing of closure. I try to explain to them but I don't think I am  
12 very successful. I said there is no such thing as closure. Certain things have been put back  
13 in the recesses of the mind that need to be put back there. They can come out at any time,  
14 but really Vietnam is alive for me. It has never been closed. It has always been part.  
15 Anybody that has ever met me knows I am not living in the past. It is alive and well and I  
16 love the country, love the people. Don't ask me why but as part of that connection that I  
17 made in '68 but it is alive, it has never been over and it won't be over. It is just, you  
18 know, part of everyday living. Now the other thing I was going to mention is that without  
19 the war I never would have had my family so that is kind of a contradiction but, you  
20 know, in some respects I have to say I am thankful for my experience over there. I don't  
21 hate it. Luckily I didn't lose a lot of friends or have the worst assignment in the world. I  
22 was fortunate. I was fortunate to make a connection to the locals, a lot of people never  
23 did that. I am grateful for it now and, you know, I wish—without Vietnam I wouldn't  
24 have my family. When I say my family I don't just mean a bunch of people that I kind of  
25 hung out with. They are in my heart adopted and they know it. When I found them in '94  
26 and wrote them a letter and "I am so happy I found my dear friends," they wrote back and  
27 said, "No, you are mistaken, Dad. You found your children." It was kind of a shock I  
28 guess that they would perceive me that way. That is how I perceived them but I didn't  
29 want to be overly forward.

30 JS: Right.

1 ML: But, you know, they are a part of me and always will be. The sad part is, and  
2 I didn't mention this, but when I found the kids in '94, in '95 Prot died and in '97 Kenh  
3 died so they were both, you know, under an age of forty and they passed away. I always  
4 thought to myself, well, you know, "If I hadn't have found them they never would have  
5 died because in my mind they always would have been those little children." You have to  
6 be careful what you wish for but anyway I still have a relationship with their widows and  
7 all their children. For me Vietnam, it has never gone away.

8 JS: Okay, all right. You also mentioned and I—

9 ML: Jason can you speak up a little bit? Or is it my phone that is going dead?

10 JS: I am sorry. Can you hear me better now?

11 ML: Yeah.

12 JS: Okay, sorry about that. You also mentioned and I meant to ask you this a little  
13 bit earlier, your role in the orphanage. Could you tell me a little bit about that?

14 ML: In the last wonderful visit was in the year 2000. My wife and my seven-year-  
15 old son at the time went back to Vietnam. During those days we were unrestricted which  
16 meant we could go visit our family and we did, we had a great time. But to answer your  
17 question, one day we went up to Kontum and I told you I used to patrol up to Kontum. I  
18 have always liked it up there. My guide that day said, "I want to take you to the old  
19 Catholic church." Well, there is an old wooden church in Kontum that has been there a  
20 hundred and something years built by the French. At the old church is a location also of  
21 an orphanage and it was on Easter. Easter Eve the Montagnards were allowed to have  
22 their Mass. It was an outdoor mass. About 10,000 Montagnards and my wife and I and  
23 our son and we had his first Holy Communion and, like I said, that was Easter Eve. It was  
24 nighttime Mass and lasted about four hours. The next day was Easter so we went back to  
25 the church. I knew the parish priest. He was a wonderful man and that is another story but  
26 he is a wonderful man and I wanted to go back and see him and thank him. It just so  
27 happened all the orphans of all ages were there and my son. We had a bunch of candy  
28 with us and he handed out candy to all of them. A lot of them didn't know to take the  
29 wrapper off because they hadn't had candy before but he handed all the candy out like we  
30 do in our country with the Easter bunny. Well, to make a long story short one of the little  
31 girls who was about two at the time, two or three, comes up to my wife and holds her

1 hand. Well, my wife is a very sensitive person and at that moment she adopts this little  
2 girl and vice-versa. We get home, you know, we take the pictures and we get home and I  
3 write the family and I said, “You have got to go back to Kontum and find out more  
4 information about this little girl, who is she, give me some more scoop.” They do and  
5 then we have sponsored her. We can’t bring her home. There is no adoptions allowed, so  
6 we sponsor her each year. That just means we fund her care. All of that myself and other  
7 veterans who have found out about this orphanage because it is kind of a tourist place  
8 now to go see that church. We have kind of come together with this group called Friends  
9 of Vinh Son Orphanage and that is the name of the orphanage, Vinh Son, and we are in  
10 our third year, I guess, or fourth year of fundraising and sponsoring and paying for  
11 projects for education to basic needs to computer skills, sewing classes, tractors, you  
12 know, all that kind of thing. It all kind of, for me anyway, it comes out of that one little  
13 Easter morning when a little girl came up and held my wife’s hand.

14 JS: Right, right.

15 ML: She is in fifth grade now and we have a relationship with her so it is really a  
16 special little thing. I went and saw her in 2006 and, you know, she hadn’t remembered  
17 me. She’d seen pictures but she, of course, was too small the last time she had seen me.

18 JS: Right.

19 ML: That is the story of the orphanage.

20 JS: Okay, all right. Well, I guess before we close the interview out and some of  
21 these you have already touched on but I have some broad questions about your  
22 experiences in the war and just your experiences in Vietnam if you could answer and you  
23 can say as much or as little as you like about them. But could you tell me about—what  
24 was your opinion on American policy towards Vietnam and Southeast Asia during the  
25 war and has that changed over time?

26 ML: A lot of people have asked questions similarly over the years, you know.  
27 Was it right? Wrong? Indifferent? Really as a soldier at the time, you know, at night we  
28 would kind of as we were cleaning our weapons and stuff if there wasn’t a whole lot to  
29 do we would occasionally try to get into discussions about good, bad, or indifferent.  
30 None of us seemed to really, I hate to say that, we were just dumb old soldiers but we  
31 really didn’t have a grasp on the political or—we just didn’t see the—we didn’t see

1 tangible evidence in our eyes every day of this was the right thing to do or what we are  
2 doing here has a purpose? We didn't see that.

3 JS: Right.

4 ML: We saw our purpose amongst ourselves doing our job the best we could for  
5 the truck drivers and everybody on the road and also for each other. It was always about  
6 that and I am sure that is a common feeling. We didn't see an end game or, you know, it  
7 wasn't like we were reading the newspaper. We might have got *Stars and Stripes* but we  
8 never did see anything that kind of fed our thought process or one thing or another.  
9 During the time there, very little of that, I mean it was mostly day by day counting our  
10 days off, you know, laughing as much as we could finding relief for all the tension or the  
11 boredom. Once I got home or in later years, like I said, I have done a lot of reading and I  
12 think it was, maybe it was a righteous idea to help the South Vietnamese but I think the  
13 tactic and the strategy that we used to go about it was probably flawed. I am kind of more  
14 of a believer of John Paul Vann who kind of suggested that it should have been more of a  
15 smaller scale kind of fought the same way that guerillas were fighting, that it couldn't be  
16 done with large American units. It had to be more small tactical advisory type effort. I go  
17 along that it was probably done incorrectly. I mean, you can say the same thing today. I  
18 mean, it is not common you hear the same talks about Iraq. You know, I was always put  
19 off by two things, treating our veterans poorly and I was never a big activist, either. I  
20 didn't like to see so many of veterans protesting the war during the war. I wasn't a big  
21 fan of that. I wasn't totally against but I wasn't a big fan or participant in that. I had  
22 mixed feelings about it all. I mean, like most complex things like that. Like I said, during  
23 the war really I was just a stupid grunt. After the war I tried to listen and to read as much  
24 as I could but I don't know if we know the answer to what is Vietnam and whatever.

25 JS: Okay, all right and—

26 ML: That is kind of a long-winded response but it is something that I still struggle  
27 with. I think we probably went about it wrong, was it right or wrong, you know. I have  
28 been to The Wall a number of times and I see the sacrifice made by so many and wonder  
29 what for. I maybe haven't seen the answer to that yet.

30 JS: Right, okay. All right. Well, just another few of these broad type questions but  
31 for you personally what would you say the legacy of the Vietnam War means to you?

1 ML: I am sorry Jason. I am having trouble hearing you there.

2 JS: Okay. For you personally what would you say the legacy of the Vietnam War  
3 is for you?

4 ML: The legacy for me?

5 JS: Yeah.

6 ML: I guess it is what I mentioned to you earlier in that the legacy for me is that it  
7 has given me a family, it has given me something outside myself. It has opened the world  
8 to me. I mean, I am not just worried about my son and daughter living here in Orange  
9 County and northern California. I have a huge world. Is it always easy? No, it is not. I  
10 get, say, seven letters in a week like I did last week and so many of them are full of pain  
11 and tough business. You know, I still burden—Vietnam is still on my back every day.

12 JS: Right, okay.

13 ML: But I don't say that that is necessarily a bad thing.

14 JS: Right, okay, all right. Well, is there anything else you would like to say or  
15 comment on before we bring the interview to a close?

16 ML: I don't think so, Jason. I think we covered everything pretty good. I mean,  
17 obviously it is a topic that I think about a lot and probably could talk about for days over  
18 a cold beer or something but, you know, it is complex. But to me right now it is just  
19 pretty simple, take care of the family as best I can.

20 JS: Sure. Okay. Well, thank you very much.

21 ML: Okay, Jason. Take care.

22 JS: Let me stop the recording and if you don't mind I would like to talk to you for  
23 a few more minutes afterward.

24 ML: Okay.

25 JS: I will go ahead and bring the interview to a conclusion now.

26 ML: Thank you.