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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Earl Wright
Conducted by Jason Stuart
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Transcribed by Emilie Meadors**

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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. Earl Wright. Today is August
3 18th, 2010. I am in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections Library on the campus of
4 Texas Tech and Mr. Riley's joining me by phone from California. Alright, why don't we
5 begin if you could tell me a little bit of biographical information about yourself? First of
6 all, when and where were you born?

7 Earl Wright: Alright, I was a true World War II baby.

8 JS: Okay.

9 EW: I was born in New Philadelphia, Ohio and how that happened, by dad was in
10 the Army air corps. Late in the war, World War II, he was moved to a small air field in
11 central California and prepared to go to the Pacific. He was a tail gunner on a B-25. He
12 liked to hang out in bars and this one bar was across the street from where my mother
13 worked, and she would go over daily to have coffee. They met and he would talk the pilot
14 into buzzing the place she worked. It blossomed into a romance. She became pregnant
15 with me, they got married. The war ended and he worked for Baltimore and Ohio
16 Railroad, so she followed him to Ohio where he was in that job. I was born in December,
17 you know, it's cold in Ohio. He spent most of his off hours drinking with his brothers and
18 his dad who also worked for the railroad. She said, "I'm sick of this." So I was six weeks
19 old when I moved to California. I grew up in a little—Kingsburg, basically a Swedish
20 town, a lot of Swedish immigrants. I actually—my dad worked at several places as a
21 maintenance mechanic. During my sixth and seventh grade years he took a job up in the

1 San Francisco Bay area, so I lived in Hayward for those two years. Then, eventually
2 moved back to Kingsburg and graduated from Kingsburg High School in 1963. Two of
3 my best friends had quit school after our junior year and one of them joined the Navy and
4 the other joined the Army. Well, I'll go back. They were gone and so one of my
5 peripheral friends, I ended up hanging around with him because we job shared. We
6 worked at a service station after school on Highway 99 and we would work every other
7 day. We each started college at College of the Sequoias in Visalia and quickly grew
8 bored with it. One day he says, "Let's go talk to the Army recruiter." I said, "Yeah, I'm
9 bored. Why not?" So we did and we signed the papers to go in on the buddy system. The
10 night before we were against the bus and leaving for boot camp, he calls me and says,
11 "I'm not going." And I said, "Well, I am." And as an aside, as little can do with me other
12 than he who didn't follow through on the buddy system, I'm about five or six weeks into
13 boot camp and I get a telephone call and its him. He's in a company across the street, a
14 couple of weeks behind me. He had received a visit and if I recall correctly, it might have
15 been someone that said, "Young man, you signed this contract. You've got to go."

16 JS: Right.

17 EW: Turns out, he got into the Army, didn't like being enlisted and he requested
18 OCS (Officer Candidate School). Got it, he went to Vietnam, won a Silver Star and got
19 any assignment he wanted, so he learned to fly helicopters and went back to Vietnam in a
20 covert unit. Ended up he spent twenty years and then retired as a major.

21 JS: Oh, wow. Okay.

22 EW: Which I thought was funny for the guy who didn't want to go in the first
23 place.

24 JS: Right, right.

25 EW: Anyway, so I went to boot camp at Fort Ord and I enlisted Airborne
26 unassigned, but I wore really, really thick glasses. So they came to me during boot camp
27 and had me sign something that basically released the Army from its obligation to send
28 me to Airborne School. You know, I was seventeen years old, what did I know? And so, I
29 signed it. I learned later that I could have waived the glasses requirement and to this day,
30 I wish I would have but I got well beyond that, so. Anyway, I go to Fort Ord and
31 Georgia, go to a radio relay carrier operator school. Really—I don't know, I was bored

1 with it, but I did fine in the school. It took a while. I had graduated and I was still hanging
2 around there without orders and finally I got orders for Vietnam. I had a—you know, I
3 had a vague notion where Vietnam was, but I had to call my mother and say, “Get the
4 atlas out and tell me where I’m going.” And it was early, early 1964 and I actually
5 arrived there in April. This is, you know, still late February, early March. I finally, you
6 know, get the orders and I’m sent to Oakland Army terminal and I get there and there are
7 guys that have been there for days that haven’t gotten transportation out. I’m thinking to
8 myself, “These guys are helicopter mechanics and that sort of thing. I’m going to be here
9 forever.”

10 JS: Right.

11 EW: Well, I looked and every day you’re supposed to check the postage board
12 and see if you’re assigned to go out. I looked on the posting board and I’m on a flight the
13 next day.

14 JS: Wow.

15 EW: I flew on a C-135, which you sit in jump seats backwards and there’s no
16 windows to the airplane. It basically takes a few days to get there. We stopped in
17 Honolulu, we stopped on Wake Islands. We stopped in overnight in the Philippines. And
18 then from what used to be Clark Airbase onto Saigon.

19 JS: Right, okay.

20 EW: I arrived in Saigon and had basically an in-processing location where I spent
21 one full day there. It was really interesting, there were only sixteen thousand Americans
22 in-country at that time. We were still a novelty. One of the kids I had gone through boot
23 camp with, I saw him in Saigon and so we went out to have a beer together and he
24 happened to be a redhead. The Vietnamese were just nuts over his red hair. And so, they
25 would want to touch his head, to see if it was real. Anyway, so one day in Saigon, and it
26 was really funny. That’s where the term “Greenies” came in for the new guys. Because
27 our fatigues were bright green and the guys going out were really faded green.
28 Immediately the new guys all wanted to have faded fatigues because you were really
29 obvious that you were a new guy. So I got orders or posts, I’m not sure how, but the next
30 day I caught a C-123 to Da Nang. You’ve got to remember, I had just turned eighteen. An
31 eighteen year old, you don’t ask questions. You just go where you’re told to go. And so I

1 had no clue when I was headed to Da Nang. I get up there and I see the 178th Signal
2 Company. That makes sense because I've been trained as a radio relay team carrier
3 operator. I check in and they say, "Well, we'll have something for you tomorrow, but in
4 the meantime, go with this guy." So they loaded me and a couple other guys in a deuce in
5 and a half, take us out to the rice patties and we picked up rocket pods off of Hueys. I
6 guess after they fired the rockets, they dropped the pods which the rockets are in. We're
7 picking them up and they're covered with big, ugly leaches and that sort of thing. That
8 was my first exposure to the boonies.

9 JS: Right.

10 EW: It was kind of like, "Oh, this is a whole lot of fun." So the next day—again, I
11 spent less than a day in Da Nang, I catch another 123, I've been assigned to the 22nd
12 Advisory Group at Kon Tum. Well, everybody around, "Oh, Kon Tum? You're going to
13 Indian country." I think it was two months prior, maybe a month prior, three sappers had
14 gotten through the wire at Kon Tum and blew up what they thought was a very important
15 hooch because they'd seen a whole lot of officers hanging around in the hooch. Well, it
16 turned out what they blew up was the officer's club. One of the NCOs (Non-
17 Commissioned Officer) there—it may have been the guard NCO, I'm not sure, shot and
18 killed one off the sappers and the other two go back up through the wire. Anyway, I get
19 there and because of that incident, tension's pretty high. The type of radios I was trained
20 to operate, basically you get them up and running and they run. You don't do anything
21 with them. So believe it or not, Jason, I did not learn until 2008 that number one, I
22 thought I was assigned to MACV (Military Assistance Command Vietnam), to the 22nd
23 Advisory Group because I spent a year with them. I always thought I was part of them. It
24 turned out I was basically a shooter. I was always—okay, a little explanation here. There
25 were probably seventy Americans in the 22nd Advisory Group.

26 JS: Okay.

27 EW: The majority of them were officers because basically they were advisors. I
28 thought I was an advisor, you know, part of their team. Well, I wasn't. But because there
29 were so few lower ranking enlisted men, I drew guard duty every other night, plus
30 convoy duty, and if they required a shooter, we were it. My basic dress everyday included
31 my M-14 with a magazine and with a round chamber. Inside the wire, the safety was on.

1 If you were outside the wire, the safety was off. A hundred rounds of ammunition and
2 four fragmentation remains. Basically, that's how I lived for a year. Well, I did not—
3 there was an incident one night. I was in a foxhole and something was eating me alive,
4 but it's black. I can't see anything. I got on the horn and called the command post, I said,
5 "Something's eating me alive. I've got to get out of here." They said, "Come in." I got in
6 and they actually had an MD doctor, not just a medic. He took one look at me and he
7 turned pale. I looked and I'm covered in fire ants. So the doc shot me full of something
8 and they called for a medevac. Well, the doc got me stabilized and the medevac couldn't
9 cause of weather and so they never did evacuate me. During my life I've had severe,
10 severe problems with apple juice. In my forties I became allergic to shellfish and in my
11 fifties, I became allergic to bee stings and it just gets worse and worse. So I file a claim to
12 the VA (Veteran's Affairs). You've probably heard some of the history of the VA.

13 JS: Right.

14 EW: They have a really, really good healthcare system and a really, really asshole
15 bunch on the plain sight.

16 JS: Yeah, I've heard that.

17 EW: So they made me find all my records. They were no help whatsoever. It took
18 me two years for me to find my records and basically what they were saying is, "Why
19 you couldn't have been in combat because you were 178th Signal Company." I said, "No,
20 I was the 22nd MACV Advisory Group." Turns out, long story short, I finally found this
21 wonderful woman in Indianapolis who found my pay records from that period. The
22 reason I wanted my pay records—also, fire pay was not automatic until 1966. So '64 and
23 '65, you had to be exposed to hostile fire six times a month and that had to be certified by
24 an officer.

25 JS: Okay.

26 EW: I knew I drew hostile fire pay every month I was there in '64 and '65. So if I
27 could get my hands on those pay records I could prove that. Well, she found them and
28 sent them to me. I did not realize what my job title was until I got those pay records and it
29 was "armed guard".

30 JS: Oh wow.

1 EW: Yeah, yeah. The claim still hasn't been resolved from the VA by the way.
2 It's been since January 2008. So I've lost track. Some of the things I wanted to point out,
3 my first tour in Vietnam was fun. It's difficult to explain—I don't know if you've been in
4 combat, maybe you'd understand.

5 JS: No, I haven't.

6 EW: You're eighteen years old, you're invincible. Nothing's going to happen, and
7 you get to play with all these wonderful toys. I mean, it was just a ball. We were in the
8 central highlands, basically jungle. The weather was pretty nasty up there so a lot of time
9 aircraft couldn't get in. So to get away from that feeling of isolation and mail was very
10 important. Especially with the kind of officers, they wanted their mail so we would run
11 their convoys down to Pleiku to pick up men. There were times I'd make two or three
12 convoys to Pleiku in a week. It was basically all the young enlisted men and easily one
13 sergeant and we would have machine gun jeep in front, a machine gun jeep in back and
14 then either a deuce and a half or a three-quarter ton truck in the middle. We would just fly
15 down highway-1 and zoom back up. You know, there was just always a feeling of
16 danger, you know, because basically anything around Kon Tum was hostile. It was
17 almost like cowboys and Indians as kids.

18 JS: Right.

19 EW: My first real exposure to the death and destruction was July 4th. I believe it
20 was '64 and with the 22nd Advisory Group we still had a Special Forces B-team. And that
21 B-team had five A-teams and was responsible for out along the border. I believe it was
22 Laos and Cambodia border with Vietnam. One of the A-teams was attacked and overrun.
23 I believe it was July 4th of '64, I'd have to look it up.

24 JS: Okay.

25 EW: We quickly formed a relief group. Basically, I think it was two companies of
26 Vietnamese and I'm going to guess ten Americans. We went and I can't say we rescued
27 them cause the fight was over when we got there. We helped place the bodies and kind of
28 get things back in order. I had a C-123 drop concertina wire that helped string and replace
29 around there. Mostly, Montagnards. Kon Tum and the and the highlands, up around there,
30 a lot of Montagnard villages. Montagnards hated the Viet Cong. Basically, the
31 montagnards hated the Vietnamese because the Vietnamese treated them so poorly. They

1 were allied with the Americans and the Special Forces had really good luck, you know,
2 arming them and training them and that sort of thing. I mean, there were a lot of things
3 that went on. That was probably the most memorable.

4 JS: Right.

5 EW: When the village and the A Team got overrun. You know, the AR-15 which
6 became the M-16 were so new that the Special Forces guys pitched theirs in the river, so
7 the Viet Cong wouldn't get them because it's obvious that the camp was overrun. In fact,
8 the bad guys got inside the wire and turned machine guns on the team house.

9 JS: Oh wow.

10 EW: Yeah, it got pretty nasty for a while. Oh, and I got to see Bob Hope.

11 JS: Oh, really?

12 EW: Yeah, that was quite a deal. Christmas '64 is coming, Bob Hope's going to
13 be in country. Closest to us, he's going to be in Pleiku. Well, we heard he's coming but
14 he couldn't go. Then we were going, but then we weren't going. At the last second, they
15 said, "Okay, put together a convoy. We're going." Whoever can be freed up is going to
16 go. Well, they held it at the 52nd Navy Battalion. In fact, I've seen pictures on the
17 internet. They have the banner behind them saying, "The 52nd Aviation Battalion", so I
18 know I was there. We come zooming in, just armed to the teeth and all the Pleiku guys
19 are unarmed because, you know. It's pretty safe around there. Hope even made a
20 comment about us when we got there.

21 JS: Really?

22 EW: Yeah, I don't remember, but it was about the show. We had a good time and
23 I was a big fan of Bob Hope's because of his USO (United Service Organization) tours,
24 so. That show really enjoyable.

25 JS: All right. Well, I've got some follow up questions for you if you don't mind,
26 from what you've covered up to this point.

27 EW: Okay.

28 JS: If we could back up a little ways. I've got a few questions about first of all,
29 your decision to join the Army. What was your motivation for joining? Was it just
30 something to do as an adventure? I guess, if you could talk a little bit more about why
31 you decided to join.

1 EW: Okay. On my father's side everybody had been in the military.
2 JS: Okay.
3 EW: It was almost like I knew I was going to go into the military. You know,
4 because I had started college and was bored with it, when my friend Joe mentioned it,
5 "Hey, that sounds like a great idea. Let's chat with them." Although I was young and a
6 little bit of, you know, in awe of the drill instructors, the senior drill instructor, it was fun.
7 I mean, it was absolutely fun. I grew up playing outside, having clod fights in the
8 neighborhood, playing sports. So I mean, boot camp came easy to me. There were some
9 guys, you'd go on a run and they were dying, or you'd have to do chin ups and they could
10 barely do one. Hey, I could do chin-ups all day. You know, so I had a good time. I
11 actually—I was in five years, ten months, twenty-three days, but who's counting?
12 JS: Right.
13 EW: In that time, there was probably only a short period I didn't enjoy what I was
14 doing.
15 JS: Well, prior to joining, had you paid much attention to what was going on in
16 the world with U.S foreign policy, the cold war? I know you mentioned that you asked
17 your mom just exactly where Vietnam was.
18 EW: I was a teenager, I didn't care.
19 JS: Right. (Laughs)
20 EW: I had no clue. I knew there was a president, I knew there was a cabinet, I
21 knew there was a congress, I knew there was a supreme court. I knew there was a foreign
22 policy, I didn't know what it was. I didn't really care what it was. It was interesting,
23 something I should probably flip in there. I was in boot camp when Kennedy was
24 assassinated.
25 JS: Okay.
26 EW: Our drill instructor immediately said, "Well, we're going to war." And I'm
27 thinking, "Holy crap, who does he mean going to war with?" I assumed then, the Soviet
28 Union. You know, so I guess I was aware of something.
29 JS: Right. All right. Well, I have a few more questions about basic if you don't
30 mind. Could you talk, I guess, a little bit about the training itself? Did you feel that it, I

1 guess, sufficiently prepared you as best it could for military life and for service in
2 Vietnam?

3 EW: I'm going to say yes. That's because I enjoyed it, so I took it seriously. My
4 platoon included a lot of draftees. Some of them took it seriously, some of them didn't.
5 I'm not sure how the ones who didn't take it seriously would have answered the question
6 you just asked or would not. I was used to guns, I was used to sleeping on the ground,
7 you know, that was things I did for fun. So for instance, I fired expert on qualification
8 day and the senior drill instructor was just tickled pink because he was used to seventeen
9 year olds being kind of the screw ups of the world. You know, I fired expert, that's all
10 just natural to me. He came up, slapped me on the back, "Way to go." That sort of thing. I
11 was scared to death of him, so I didn't know it was a complement.

12 JS: Right. Well, that brings up another question I had for you. If you could talk a
13 little bit more about the drill instructors and your impressions of those guys.

14 EW: I knew you were going to get there. All right. The drill instructor as I
15 explained to you, I was scared to death of him, I loved him. He was just the most squared
16 away person I ever met in my life. Where I grew up, there were only two Black families.
17 So I didn't know a whole lot about it, but I had friends who were Black. Well, this guy
18 was—he was Black and I mean, like I said, I was scared to death of him and loved him at
19 the same time. The guy was the most squared away soldier I ever met in my life. Now,
20 my particular platoon sergeant had no respect for him at all. He was a total loser. He was
21 a World War II E5 which, if he can't get past E5 in twenty-something years, that tells you
22 what a loser he was. So I had no respect for him whatsoever. Basically, we operated
23 despite him.

24 JS: Okay. The other drill instructor, the one that you said that you admired, but
25 were also afraid of, was he a combat veteran as well? Do you know?

26 EW: Yes, he was.

27 JS: Okay.

28 EW: In fact, I heard later that he was killed in Vietnam, but I don't know that as a
29 fact. I just ran into one of the guys from the platoon later.

30 JS: Right. Any other memorable moments or funny moments, anything like that
31 from boot camp that stick out in your mind?

1 EW: No, I pretty much did what I was told. Exceeded what was expected of me.
2 Just because that was the kind of person I am and I enjoyed it, I really enjoyed it and it
3 came easy to me.

4 JS: All right. Well, once you got that next assignment for advanced training at
5 Fort Gordon with the radios, you seemed to think that that wasn't what you really wanted
6 to do. What was your reaction when you got that assignment?

7 EW: Again, you know, when you're eighteen years old you do what you're told.

8 JS: Right.

9 EW: In fact, throughout my military career I was always highly—superiors and
10 you know, they recommended schools to me and this and that. The other thing—well, the
11 only time I really got in trouble was going through school in Fort Gordon. Basically, one
12 of the guys in my platoon was older. He was twenty-two I believe, from Philadelphia
13 who hung out in gin mills. I didn't know what a gin mill was. One day he invited me to
14 take the bus into town and head over to South Carolina because you could drink at
15 eighteen. So we'd go to South Carolina and we'd spend the afternoon drinking there and
16 we'd walk back to Augusta, have to walk across the river. He says, "Hey, watch me piss
17 in two states at once?" He jumps up on the bridge before I know what's happened.

18 JS: (Chuckles) Right.

19 EW: We were not off of that bridge before we were in a paddy wagon.

20 JS: Oh wow.

21 EW: And took us down—actually, we were the first people they put in the paddy
22 wagon, so they spent the rest of the time picking up hookers and pimps and all kinds of
23 ne'er-do-wells. I was like, "How did I get myself into this?"

24 JS: (Laughs) Right.

25 EW: Well, I got an article fifteen out of it and the company commander, he cracks
26 me up. It doesn't sound like a whole lot of money, but when you make it seventy-eight
27 dollars a month, he says, "I'm finning these ten dollars for being drunk, and I'm finning
28 you another ten for hanging around with Monahan." That was the only time I was in
29 trouble.

30 JS: All right.

31 EW: I actually didn't want to do that again.

1 JS: Well, could you talk, I guess just a little bit about that training you received
2 there at Fort Gordon and what it was like?

3 EW: Well, let's see. Basically, these were cabinet-sized radios, a four-door
4 cabinet.

5 JS: Okay.

6 EW: Basically, about that size. What they did is they supported telephone
7 communication. So you'd have a set of these radios at one end connected to phone lines.
8 And then I set the same radios on the other end, connected to phone lines. Then, people
9 could communicate. Basically, it was a lot of reading how they operated and once you
10 dialed in the frequencies, the only thing that could go wrong is you would change out
11 components.

12 JS: Okay.

13 EW: So, I could do it. I wasn't really interested in it, but I never, other than school
14 believe it or not, Jason, I never worked on those radios again.

15 JS: All right. How long did that training last?

16 EW: Okay, let's see. I believe it was two months. Let's say ten weeks. Ten weeks
17 sounds more reasonable.

18 JS: Okay, alright. And once that training was over with, that's when you got the
19 assignment to Vietnam?

20 EW: Correct.

21 JS: Okay, what was your reaction to being assigned to Vietnam?

22 EW: Uh, I was pretty excited. I had seen Vietnam mentioned in the newspaper. I
23 had heard it occasionally mentioned on TV news. I was headed somewhere where the
24 happenings were. You know, although I wasn't exactly sure where in the world it was, I
25 knew this is where the news was being made and I was going to be there.

26 JS: All right. Let's see, you left in April of '64, is that right?

27 EW: Correct.

28 JS: How did you get over there? Was it a civilian airline? Oh, you told me. That's
29 right, I remember.

30 EW: It was a C-135. Interesting point on that, I've never been able to confirm the
31 same aircraft that was exactly a week behind us. The aircraft making that flight on

1 approach into Clark Airbase in the Philippine's struck a tanker truck, exploded, and killed
2 everyone on board.

3 JS: Oh, wow.

4 EW: I go, "Man, somebody was looking out for me to get me on the flight a week
5 before that happened." You can go on the internet and find the tail number of the one that
6 crashed, but I didn't know the tail number of the one that I was on. You know, it may
7 have been the same aircraft, making its return trip.

8 JS: Well, once you arrived in country, what was your first impression of
9 Vietnam?

10 EW: Man, is it hot.

11 JS: Right.

12 EW: And muggy. You know, I grew up in the central valley so, you know, heats
13 not a big thing in the summer. It's typically over 100s, but real, real dry. We've got
14 humidity probably in the twenty-three percent range. Well, Vietnam, the humidity runs
15 up to a hundred percent. Even arriving in April, man that's the first thing that hits you.
16 You walk out of the airplane and just go, "Wow, what was that?" You know, the Air
17 Force lives well. They live in concrete barracks with air conditioning, while the Army
18 lives in hooches which are basically tents with floors and it's stinky hot.

19 JS: Well, could you talk more about—I guess, a little more on that subject about
20 Kon Tum and what the base there looked like. I know you mentioned the quarters, but the
21 housing, the food, and all of that.

22 EW: The U.S base back then was located right on Highway-1. The highway's
23 almost a misnomer. If you're familiar with one lane country roads in America, you know
24 what Highway-1 looks like. Basically, surrounded by two layers of wire. One was the
25 chain link fence and then concertina wire. As the year went on and the war escalated, it
26 wasn't escalating much. From the time I got there, there were sixteen thousand
27 Americans in country and by the time I left, there were twenty-one thousand Americans
28 who'd come in country. So it's not a whole lot. But you've got to remember there were a
29 lot of incidents that happened during that time. You know, the (unintelligible) were
30 allegedly attacked by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. In August of '64, you know, we
31 did retaliate toward strikes. When was it? Oh yeah, February of '65 the VC (Viet Cong)

1 attacked Pleiku and basically overran it. A lot of the helicopters from the 52nd Aviation
2 Battalion were able to get off the ground and they brought them up to us on Kon Tum.
3 Hid them is probably a misnomer, but that's basically what we did is we hid them.
4 Because we thought we were going to get it. I mean, the next logical place to hit was us
5 and we thought we were going to get attacked. As all of these incidents were going on
6 during that year I was there, we went from standard fox holes, which you think of as a
7 fox hole—so fighting positions, to bunkers reinforced with logs we would go cut down in
8 the jungle. Logs and sandbags. They were reinforcing fighting positions basically, so we
9 had gone, you know, from the basic all the way up to more sophisticated as the worries
10 increased about attacks. Now, as I explained to you earlier, I pulled guard duty every
11 other night. It was standard you would pull two, two hour shifts during the night. The
12 American's job, there would be two of us walking the perimeter. Our job was to make
13 sure that the Montagnard guards were alert and paying attention to what they were
14 supposed to be doing. So we would walk the perimeter, there would be a Montagnard
15 guard every thirty yards or so around the perimeter. Our job was to just make sure they
16 were alert. You know, and to provide English speaking communication to the command
17 post and if any incidents happened and that sort of thing. We had two gigantic diesel-
18 powered generators that ran these big lights, almost like stadium lights that would shine
19 out from the perimeter. We had the jungle. At some point I'm sure the Seabee's or some
20 construction outfit or something had been out there. The jungle was pushed back,
21 probably a quarter mile in all directions from our base camp. And so, you had a pretty
22 good view. It would have been real difficult to sneak up on us. Although, they did it
23 occasionally. They would make probes and that sort of thing. Oh, one funny incident. The
24 lights would attract these giant beetles. I mean, really huge beetles. The Montagnards just
25 loved—when I would be walking by, they would catch two or three of these beetles and
26 they'd yank their wings off. They'd keep them alive, but they'd yank their wings off so
27 they couldn't fly and they'd make a little hole in the dirt and they'd put them in there
28 until they had three or four of them. And then they'd just pop them in their mouth like
29 candy and laugh like crazy until they would go, "RRRR."

30 JS: (Laughs) Oh man.

1 EW: They thought it was cool. Another incident with the Montagnards. I was not
2 on this patrol, but I had a patrol out and basically a patrol would be a company of
3 Vietnamese soldiers, an American captain, an American lieutenant, an American
4 Sergeant, and then American lower-enlisted men to operate the radio which would be a
5 backpack radio. The patrol was out and had found a female leopard with two cubs that
6 had tripped a booby trap. The mother and one off the cubs was killed. One of the cubs
7 was still alive, so they brought it back in and basically turned it loose in the compound.
8 This thing was cute as hell when it was a little kitten, but it became a total pain in the butt
9 when it started to grow.

10 JS: Right.

11 EW: It would get down in the drainage ditches as you come walking by and then
12 it'd leap out to attack you. One night the Montagnards got a hold of it and cut off its tail
13 and they hung the tail in their tent because it was good luck. In their culture it was good
14 luck. And so our doctor, and again, he was an M.D, had to perform surgery on the cub
15 because its tail was gone. We finally had to get rid of it. I don't know, if we turned it over
16 to the zoo or turned it over to something. In fact, I don't know if we put it on an aircraft it
17 went to—I'm not sure where. Speaking of pain and a half, early when I got there, we had
18 three monkeys that lived in the compound with us.

19 JS: Okay.

20 EW: They were a total pain in the ass. They would throw rocks at you; they
21 would throw anything they could get their hands on. Finally, I think they just took them
22 out and shot them. You'd think, "Oh, monkeys are cute." Well, no way. Oh, another
23 animal incident.

24 JS: Okay.

25 EW: I told you the Special Forces A-team was out in the Montagnard village,
26 where it was. Well, it was right on the river. The way we had to get there was there was a
27 cable strung across the river and basically a barge attached to another cable and you
28 would lower it onto the barge and you would pull it across the river and probably get ten,
29 twelve GI's fully armed. Okay, I'm on like the third crossing. All of a sudden, the
30 Vietnamese on the barge are going nuts. You know, they're talking so fast I couldn't
31 understand them. They're pointing and I see what looks like a log coming down the river.

1 I'm thinking, well, they're afraid the log's going to hit the barge and overturn it or
2 something. Well, then the log moved and a gigantic snake. It's like, "Oh my god, get us
3 out of here." I didn't want anything to do with that. Anyway, they made it to shore and
4 everything was fine.

5 JS: Right. Okay, well another question I have for you. You don't have to discuss
6 specific names if you'd prefer not to, but could you I guess discuss some of the
7 personalities in the unit with the guys that you were working with? If you could talk a
8 little bit about that.

9 EW: Most of the guys—it's funny, most of the guys were from the east coast or
10 the south. I was the only one from California. The one I grew closest to was from
11 Buffalo, New York. You know, I wasn't really used to ethnicity and my dad always talks
12 about growing up around Italians and Polish and you know, different cultures. Well, I
13 grew up around Swedes and Mexicans. And that's what I knew. My friend's last name
14 was Grys. I'm going, "What kind of a name is that? It doesn't have any vowels."

15 JS: (Chuckles) Right.

16 EW: Anyway, I got exposed to a lot more than the southern kids and the eastern
17 kids. Although, I bet I can't tell you everyone's names except Joe's. We seemed really
18 close. Was not like, you know, the closeness of an American combat unit. It was not like
19 that because we were, you know, we were pretty much interchangeable. Probably from
20 the ten, twelfth guys, whatever there was. There would be six of us on any particular
21 convoy or assignment or whatever. You know, we didn't grow close like an American
22 combat unit, but we were, you know, we were good friends.

23 JS: Alright, when you first came into country, how were you received? Was there
24 any of the new guy treatment or did things go well from the beginning?

25 EW: No, no new guy treatment. In fact, I was a little surprised. Like I said, I spent
26 a day in Saigon and then a day in Da Nang. You know, the people working the process,
27 the were kind of dickheads, but they get tired of that crap and that's a terrible job
28 anyway. That's probably why they were like that. Once I got up to the 22nd, you know, it
29 was fine. Like I said, I always thought I was part of that unit. In fact, in my mind I was
30 part of MACV, the 22nd Advisory Group. It came as quite a shock to me that I wasn't.

31 JS: Well, how was morale at that point?

1 EW: Actually, morale was good, it was really good. I mean, we were young. I'll
2 bet we were at the whorehouse every other day. Basically, the mama san at the
3 whorehouse treated us like family. You know, life was good. I didn't have a whole lot
4 growing up. I mean, I had enough to eat and I had clothes on my back and stuff like that,
5 but I thought I was living the good life. You know, the French were in Vietnam before
6 we were.

7 JS: Right.

8 EW: They left behind quite a bit of influence. So mama san at the whorehouse
9 one day says, "I'm going to prepare you boys dinner." We show up and it was this seven-
10 course French dinner.

11 JS: Oh, wow.

12 EW: It was freaking awesome. I mean, it was just unbelievably good. So she
13 knew how to treat her customers.

14 JS: Right. Of the group, were you the only radio guy there?

15 EW: No, that's what was so odd. Like I said, I'm saying ten or twelve is kind of
16 what I remember. That's was our MOS (Military Occupational Specialty).

17 JS: Okay.

18 EW: We never did anything with those radios. They were up and running and as
19 long as they were up and running, they were fine.

20 JS: Alright. Another thing, if you could talk a little bit about your daily routine in
21 Vietnam—if there was such a thing.

22 EW: Let's see, basically guard duty was the most important. I mean, the night was
23 the scariest because the VC owned the night and we owned the day. The military's total
24 different now. Now, Americans own the night, you know, with the night vision
25 equipment that's been developed in the last few years. But in Vietnam, it was the other
26 way around. We owned the day, they owned the night. So the night was the most
27 important. So that perimeter duty was the priority. During the day, they would have
28 different things they wanted you to do or nothing. Like I said, some days we just hung
29 out at the whorehouse. I can remember—trust me, I am no electrician. I wired a building
30 and I'm going to say the building was the size of a small garage.

31 JS: Okay.

1 EW: I wired the entire thing and I'm going, "How did I know how to do that?" I
2 have no clue, but that was the job they gave me one day. Alright, we want power to this
3 building, we want outlets here, here, and here. You know, bring it in from the generator
4 and it did it, it worked. Trust me, there weren't very many permeant buildings on sight,
5 and I can't remember what this one was standing for. I think it was the communications
6 building. Like our command post was, you know, the containers that go on ships and then
7 you put them on trucks. Basically, it was like an earlier version of that covered with sand
8 bags and that was our command post.

9 JS: How about the convoy duties? How often would you go out on those?

10 EW: Oh boy, probably at least once a week, sometimes twice a week in the bad
11 weather.

12 JS: Okay.

13 EW: Maybe less, maybe once a week when the weather was okay. Understand,
14 we had a really tiny PX (Post Exchange), if you want to call it a PX basically. You'd buy
15 your cigarettes and your shaving—whatever you needed for that. A lot of times we would
16 have a pallet come in on an aircraft to Pleiku and we'd need to run down and pick up that
17 pallet because aircraft couldn't get into Kon Tum. And the mail, the mail was just a
18 priority.

19 JS: Alright.

20 EW: If we went two days without mail, you can guarantee there'd be a convoy to
21 Pleiku on the third day to go pick up mail bags.

22 JS: Right, so the convoys were always between Pleiku and Kon Tum?

23 EW: Yeah, except for instance, when the Special Forces A-team was overrun.
24 That was a different kind of convoy, a much larger convoy. Typically, we had no
25 Vietnamese with us in our convoys down to Pleiku. Occasionally we would have air
26 cover. Again, it depended on the weather. They didn't like us to go without air cover, but
27 you know, you've been without mail for a couple of days. They said, "Okay, go." And
28 we would go.

29 JS: Alright.

30 EW: I got to tell you about the air cover.

31 JS: Yeah, sure.

1 EW: The advisory group was made up of all the U.S Forces. Why we had Navy
2 with us, I have no clue. But there was even a couple of Navy guys, a couple of Marines,
3 some Air Force, mostly Army. They would assign—and you’ve got to remember, this is
4 the early days of the war, so they didn’t quite have it figured out yet. They would assign
5 jet pilots on six-month tour duties to come in and fly our L-19. You know what an L-19
6 is?

7 JS: Yeah,

8 EW: Single-engine, probably 150 horse-power.

9 JS: Right.

10 EW: These guys would be bored to death. And so, I recall one particular convoy,
11 we would sit on the outskirts of Con Thum waiting for the air cover to show up. Here
12 comes the L-19 and he comes, and he touches down on the road, he touches left and a
13 little down on the road and goes back up and touches the right wheel on the road, goes
14 up. You know, just something to do because he’s bored. Oh, and then the Air Force guys
15 weren’t really trained for combat. So part of my job was to take them out. We had a place
16 in the jungle that we used as a firing range and we made a berm there so you could throw
17 hand grenades over the berm. As I told you, I wore four hand grenades basically every
18 day. Because you get in and out of jeeps or aircraft, you don’t want to have an accident so
19 you would turn the bottom of the handle up and put a rubber band around it so even if the
20 pin pulled out, it wouldn’t let the handle free. Well, I had probably six hand grenades in
21 an ammo box and then you’d take the Air Force guys that were typically captains, take
22 them out, have them throw hand grenades just so they’d have the feel of it. I had this one
23 captain out and I went through the routine, “Okay, lift to your chest, pull the pin with the
24 arm back and throw it.” Well, I’m assuming everybody knows to take the rubber band
25 off. He doesn’t take the rubber band off. He pulls the pin and he throws it over the berm
26 and it doesn’t go off. He jumps up, before I can say anything, he jumps up and runs after
27 it, gets it, and gets it back. That’s probably the most dangerous thing he could do. You
28 know, he was too quick for me. He probably wouldn’t have listened to me anyway.

29 JS: All these convoys, would you guys ever come under fire from the enemy
30 during these convoys?

31 EW: I think we came under fire once.

1 JS: Okay.

2 EW: Typically, it was bad, ugly road. Windy and kind of mountainous. You're
3 going from elevation down to plateau. Typically, we would do speeds of fifty and above
4 and basically that was to discourage being fired upon. You know, as the year went
5 along—it's hard to explain. As I told you, we'd have a machine gun jeep and a machine
6 gun jeep and back and whatever our size our load was going to be in the middle. So it
7 would be a few quarter ton truck or a deuce and a half. As the war started to escalate and
8 get more serious, there was danger of mines in the roads or booby traps and that sort of
9 thing, we sandbag the vehicles. You would have sandbags on the floor so any impact
10 coming up from the road, hopefully the sandbags would stop. Our greatest fear was mines
11 or booby traps for and being shot. We would typically sit on our flak jackets. Your legs
12 would be protected by—you know, the sandbags and your ass would be protected by the
13 flak jacket. No seatbelts, naturally. We had one incident—I was not on this particular
14 convoy. We had a kid from Puerto Rico that was always begging to drive, and nobody
15 wanted to let him drive. Well, one convoy they let him drive the three-quarter truck
16 and—it's a quarter ton truck and he rolled it. There were four guys in the back, yeah four.
17 No, four guys in the back and basically scattered them all over the hillside. We did have
18 air cover that day and I remembered a pilot radioing, "Oh my god, they're all dead."
19 Well, they weren't. You know, a couple of them were injured seriously enough they had
20 to be medevac'd to Nha Trang. Needless to say, that kid never got to drive again.

21 JS: Right. What would be your job on the convoys? Would you do some driving
22 when you were gone or what?

23 EW: I did both. I sometimes drove the jeep, sometimes I drove the deuce and a
24 half, and sometimes I manned the machine gun. It just depended—early on when people
25 don't really know you or trust you as much as they would later, I would basically just be
26 a gunner. And later, you know, you'd drive—I can't recall exactly how we figured out
27 who was going to do what. I think it was the more experienced guys would be the drivers,
28 you know, later on.

29 JS: Well, if we could change gears here a little bit. If I could ask you a little bit
30 about your impressions of the enemy and what interaction you had with them?

1 EW: Early on, it was you know—my first tour was Viet Cong, my second tour
2 was more NVA (North Vietnamese Army). Basically, we thought of them as little guys in
3 pajamas that would shoot you in a heartbeat if they had to. You know, I don't know. I
4 didn't have any face to face with them that I was aware of. I always thought some of our
5 workers—we had females come on and do laundry, we had males come on the compound
6 and do some mechanical work. We always figured they were spies or in fact, Vietcong,
7 but you know, how do you tell one from the other? You can't. You always worked under
8 the assumption. I learned to speak a little bit of Vietnamese. It basically was an
9 interaction from them. My second tour, I had way more interaction with the Vietnamese
10 and I learned to speak more Vietnamese at that point.

11 JS: Okay.

12 EW: You know, I can't tell you what my impression of the enemy was. It's been
13 so long ago, you know, I guess at night I thought of them as scary because like I said,
14 they basically owned the night. We didn't do anything at night except protect ourselves.
15 Like, we weren't in town at night. You know, in fact, nobody went anywhere at night
16 unless it was a patrol out somewhere. You know, they were out for multiple days, then
17 they'd be out overnight. But otherwise, we didn't do anything at night.

18 JS: How often would the enemy attack or harass you guys there at the base at Kon
19 Tum?

20 EW: Oh, I'm going to say six or eight times during the year. It was basically
21 harassment. We would have alerts far more often. If I was not walking perimeter, I was
22 part of a team with a thirty-caliber machine gun. The team consisted of three guys. One
23 guy had the tripod, one guy had the gun itself, and then one guy had the ammo.

24 JS: Okay.

25 EW: We had a designated fighting position and we would basically meet there
26 and get the gun ready. The way they would call alert would be a police siren which you
27 typically would hear now as a siren. So for years after that I could not hear a police siren
28 without my heart jumping. I mean, most Vietnam vets hear the flap of a Huey—and I did
29 too, I react. I also reacted to the police siren because of that. I remember one particular
30 night being so scared because you would not get dressed, you would just show up in your
31 underwear because it's too hot to sleep with clothes on. Some guys slept totally naked.

1 I'm not sure how they responded, but I was so scared that something was really
2 happening that I'd just begin throwing up involuntarily. You know, I wasn't sick or
3 anything, it was just pure fright. It must have been early in my tour.

4 JS: Would they normally harass you guys? Would it be incoming fire? Things like
5 rockets and mortar?

6 EW: Yeah, sometimes it would be rifle fire.

7 JS: Okay.

8 EW: Sometimes it was rockets, sometimes it was mortars. You know, they never
9 killed anybody on the compound so I'm not sure what their purpose was. I imagine it
10 would keep us awake, keep us alert to the fact, "Okay, we're out here."

11 JS: All right. I know you also mentioned working quite a bit with the
12 Montagnards. Could you talk a little bit more about them? I guess, about your
13 impressions of them and were they good soldiers, that type of thing?

14 EW: Yeah, as a people, I thought they were really good people. They were loyal.
15 For years have been discriminated against by the Vietnamese, so they typically didn't like
16 the Vietnamese and because of that, didn't like the Viet Cong. I think that had a lot to do
17 with why they fought alongside us. I believe—you know, they were fierce fighters. While
18 the 22nd ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam)—that's who our team advised, the
19 22nd ARVN Division. Well, they had a terrible reputation. They would abandon their
20 American advisors out in the field, run back to base. The Montagnards were the complete
21 opposite and it was a real honor for the Americans to have a copper bracelet presented
22 them by the Montagnards. Basically, the ceremony was the village elders would take
23 you—God, there's a name for it. I can't think of what it is, but it's almost like a club
24 house. It's the main building in the village and that's where the men hang out. They
25 would invite you in and you'd drink rice wine with them, and they would present you
26 with a copper Montagnard bracelet. It was a goal and an honor for the Americans to get
27 their copper bracelets given by the Montagnards. Something else that just occurred to me,
28 I can't for the life of me remember her name, but there was an American nun who ran an
29 orphanage about five clicks out of Kon Tum. The Americans basically adopted her—we
30 were her protector. So we strung phone line out to the orphanage and gave her a field
31 phone so she could be in touch with us anytime it was necessary. Then, we would go out

1 there probably once a month that I remember, and probably other guys went out there at
2 other times. We would take her supplies and the doc would come out and help her check
3 the kids, that sort of thing. She was forever in need of blood, so she was like a vampire.
4 She wanted the blood.

5 JS: Right.

6 EW: I'm pretty small. So all my life I'm usually too light to give blood or my
7 blood pressure's too low, so they won't take it. Let me tell you, she did not give a rat's
8 ass. She threw me up on this table, stuck a needle in both arms, and took the blood. You
9 know how at the blood center they give you orange juice afterwards?

10 JS: Right.

11 EW: She handed me a bottle of beer. She was quite the woman. Pat, her name was
12 Pat. She was a nun and I believe she was an American. I'm pretty sure she was.

13 JS: Aside from this, did you participate in any other kind of civic action type
14 programs?

15 EW: Boy, not that I can think of off the top of my head, Jason. Sorry.

16 JS: That's fine. How many kids did she have there at the orphanage?

17 EW: Oh, I'm thinking in the range of a hundred.

18 JS: Oh wow, okay.

19 EW: I mean, it was pretty common to have orphans. Actually, I think it's pretty
20 common now. I think I was online yesterday refreshing my memory of some of these
21 things and there are now two orphanages in Kon Tum proper that are fairly large. You
22 know, that's a pretty common problem.

23 JS: Were these Montagnard kids?

24 EW: I don't think she discriminated. I believe there were a little of both.

25 JS: Okay, alright.

26 EW: I guess, were they primarily from parents who had been killed in the war or
27 kids that were just abandoned?

28 JS: I think the majority were parents who were killed in the war. I also believe
29 there were some "halfies". You know, half America-half Vietnamese type kids that were
30 abandoned.

31 EW: Right, right.

1 JS: Let's see, another question I had for you. If you could talk a little bit more
2 about your impressions of the Vietnamese civilian population and what was the
3 relationship like with them? Were they friendly? Did they tend to be somewhat hostile?
4 Somewhere in the middle?

5 EW: No, they were friendly. Like I said, when I got there, there was only sixteen
6 thousand Americans in-country, so we were still a novelty. Yeah, occasionally the
7 Vietnamese soldiers would not be friendly and there were two reasons for that. The
8 Americans did not have a lot of respect for their abilities or their motivation, but also the
9 Americans hung around with their women and they didn't like that.

10 JS: All right.

11 EW: In fact, I'm trying to recall the incident. I believe I was threatened by a
12 Vietnamese Special Forces Soldier because I'd been with his woman or what he
13 considered his woman.

14 JS: Right. Since you arrived there fairly early in the war, before the majority of
15 Americans had begun to come into country in the build-up, did you see as your first tour
16 progressed—did you actually see the buildup and things changing in Vietnam?

17 EW: Well, it was changing as far as my unit was concerned and I assumed those
18 changes were going on around the country. As I told you, we became more and more
19 heavily prepared. You know, we were expecting large action and in fact, if you're aware
20 of history at Can Tho and Duc Tho and places like that where there's these big, big
21 battles around there. The war planners could see it coming, so we were preparing for it
22 when I got home that time.

23 JS: Well, did you hear much about some of these larger developments? I know
24 you mentioned the Gulf of Tonkin incident earlier, did you guys get much information
25 about that type of thing? And if so, what was your reaction to it?

26 EW: Okay, the only source of news we had was—occasionally *Stars and Stripes*
27 come in. Basically, whenever we'd get a mail pick up or an aircraft was able to get in
28 with mail, we'd have access to *Stars and Stripes*. We were aware—we were not
29 necessarily aware of the implications. You know, GI's are worried about what's going on
30 in their foxhole. They're not necessarily—what's going on, you know, concerned about

1 what's going on in the war. Even in the world, even if it concerns them. Because, you
2 know, you get things to worry about right here.

3 JS: Right.

4 EW: In my adult civilian life I'm much more aware of what's going on and how it
5 relates. You know, at that point I want to stay alive and have a meal, get some sleep. It's
6 amazing how important sleep becomes when it's not regular. I learned how to sleep
7 anywhere, on anything.

8 JS: In that case, when would you catch your sleep? Just whenever you had a little
9 downtime?

10 EW: Right. Let's say I was on an aircraft or on a truck where, you know, being a
11 gunner was not my responsibility, I would fall asleep. I mean, you would just catch sleep
12 was you could.

13 JS: Did you get a chance to go on R&R (Rest and Recuperation) during your first
14 tour?

15 EW: No, there was no such thing.

16 JS: Okay, too early for that then?

17 EW: Yeah. Something just occurred to me when I mentioned aircraft. It's hard to
18 explain but rules and regulations were—I don't want to say lax, that's not necessarily the
19 correct term, but they weren't as strict. You know, if you're on a military base in the U.S
20 during peace time, I mean there's all kinds of rules and regulations concerning dress and
21 procedures and that sort of thing. There weren't—I mean, I sometimes wore a
22 camouflage uniform, sometimes didn't and it didn't matter what the uniform that day
23 was. It mattered—what I thought was clean I put on that particular day. I carried several
24 different weapons. I guess you would call some unauthorized weapons, but I had access
25 to them, and I carried them. Well, one of the things you were able to do is hitchhike on
26 aircraft. I had this incident where we had a 2nd lieutenant who was our boss came to me
27 and said, "You've been nominated for soldier of the month. You need to appear in Saigon
28 on this day in khaki uniform." I think to myself, "What? I haven't seen my khaki uniform
29 in six months." I dug them out of my duffle bag and they're all moldy and crappy. So I
30 gave them to mama san to clean them up the best she could, get them pressed. I could not

1 get a flight out of Kon Tum, so I brought a ticket on Air Vietnam and basically, it's an
2 old C-47. There were people with chickens in the cabin. I mean, it was pretty hilarious.

3 JS: All right.

4 EW: And I flew down to Saigon. Well, as I told you I thought I was part of the
5 MACV 22nd Advisory Group. This was the 178th Signal Company, soldier of the month
6 nomination board. I didn't know who these people were. I didn't give a shit, seriously. So
7 I was down in Saigon for a couple days and I'd been before to board and they didn't think
8 I was really much of a soldier, so I wasn't named soldier of the month. I'm thinking,
9 "I've got to get back up to Kon Tum." So I go out to Tan Son Nhut Air Base in an
10 operations shack and said, "I need to get a flight back to Kon Tum." There's a C-130
11 warming up out on the ramp and they said, "Well, go check with them. I think they're
12 going to Pleiku." So I ran out there and yelled at the crew chief. I said, "I need a ride up
13 north, you got room?" He said, "Sure, hop aboard. We're going to Pleiku." I get on board
14 and I'm the only passenger on the whole plane. There's no cargo, there's nothing. It's an
15 empty aircraft to me. So I go out to Pleiku and hell, there's not even an operation shack,
16 but I see a Huey getting ready to take off. I run up, ask the crew chief, "I need to get to
17 Kon Tum." He says, "Well, we're dropping some stuff in the Ia Drang Valley. We'll drop
18 you back on our way back." So basically, I hitched home from Saigon. It was really
19 interesting too, because the flight on the 130 was uneventful, but the chopper flight was
20 definitely over a lot of hostile country and we drew fire. We were flying along a creek
21 bed and all of a sudden, the creek bed ends, and he pulls it up. As soon as we pull it up,
22 we're attacked on fire. Typically, in those days the crew chief of each helicopter acted as
23 its star gunner while it meant there was only a gun on one side. So I acted as his gunner
24 on the other side, just even it out. They flopped right into Kon Tum and dropped me off. I
25 don't know how else I would've gotten back.

26 JS: Right, right. Well, during your short time there in Saigon, did you get to do
27 anything there? Did you get to see any of Saigon?

28 EW: Oh yeah, yeah. I'll spend every night driving around the town. I learned that,
29 you know, Saigon proper was one place and then Cho Lon, which you really couldn't tell
30 the difference—but the Cho Lon District was the Chinese dominated area. A lot of East
31 Indians in town and in fact, they ran the restaurants and I had a steak that I'm sure was

1 water buffalo. I think I was there two nights, just seeing the sights. You know, you could
2 grab a taxicab. Taxis were little tiny (unintelligible) in a kind of cream and blue. They
3 were all over the place in Saigon. It was pretty easy to grab a cab and go anywhere you
4 wanted.

5 JS: Alright, well any other memorable moments or funny moments? Anything
6 like that from this first tour that stick out in your mind?

7 EW: I think I've related all the high points.

8 JS: All right. Well, anything else we should mention at all from the first tour
9 before moving on?

10 EW: No, I think we've covered it, Jason.

11 JS: Okay. All right. Well, so you went home, was it April of '65?

12 EW: Correct.

13 JS: Okay.

14 EW: And I was assigned to a signal company at Fort Irwin, California, which is
15 outside of Barstow. I got there and the company was packing to leave for, where else,
16 Vietnam.

17 JS: Right.

18 EW: I met with the CO (Commanding Officer). At this time, I was a PFC (Private
19 First Class), so I hadn't gotten very high up the ranks. Of course, I'd only been in
20 eighteen months. He said, "You basically have a choice. You can check into unit and go
21 with us to Vietnam or because you just got back, we'll assign you to the headquarters
22 company at Fort Irwin." I wasn't ready to go back at that moment, so I went ahead and
23 took the assignment to the headquarters company. There were probably six of us. Four
24 back from Vietnam, two back from Korea. They took us into Headquarters company, but
25 they didn't have jobs for us, so I was like post mail clerk for a while. I don't remember
26 what else. I basically didn't have a job. Without a job you didn't get promoted, so I felt I
27 had been a PFC forever. For six months or whatever. The IG (Inspector General) comes
28 in on inspection tours they do once a year. So I said, "I want to see the IG." Basically,
29 went for him and said, "Hey, I think I got myself in a bad situation here. I don't have a
30 job, I don't have an assignment and therefore I can't get promoted." Well, they said they
31 would look into it. I figured that wouldn't go anywhere. So, about—let's see, I got home

1 in April and I guess I was assigned there in May, so I've been there six months let's say.
2 Finally, the place where I did the mail was next door to the re-enlistment office. The re-
3 enlistment sergeant was always on me. He says, "I can take care of you, I can take care of
4 you." So finally, I said, "The only way I'm going to get anywhere in this Army is to take
5 a short and do a re-enlistment." So that's what I did. I got assigned to the induction center
6 in Fresno, which is basically where I was inducted. Met the woman who would become
7 my wife. I knew I wasn't going to spend a whole lot of time there, but I was promoted to
8 E4 and got orders to go to France. Let's see, I was supposed to report during the summer
9 of '66, so I'm going to guess July.

10 JS: Okay.

11 EW: So I proposed to my wife. I said, "I'm being shipped to Europe, I'd like to
12 get married in June." She agreed. As an E4, we got married in the oldest Catholic Church
13 in California. Located over Monterey. The only reason we got to do that was because I
14 was in the Army. The head of the diocese in Fresno, took pity on me, and made
15 arrangements. My wife is a staunch Catholic, I am not. I'm a Protestant. You know, I
16 signed my life away that I'd raise all my kids in the Catholic Church and yada, yada and
17 he agreed. He'd arranged it so me and one of my friends, and my wife and one of her
18 girlfriends all jumped in my car over there. The church was decorated nice because there
19 was a big wedding right behind us. We got married, came home to a backyard reception
20 and then a couple weeks later I was on the USS *Buckner* on the way to France. You have
21 not lived until you've spent seven days on a troop ship. That was awful.

22 JS: (Laughs) Right. How did you spend your time there? How did you pass the
23 time?

24 EW: Every other day you would get—I'd call it KP (Kitchen Patrol) duty. And
25 then every other day you were off. Occasionally they would let you up on deck to get
26 some fresh air. I remember I was off the day we went through the English channel and I
27 saw the White Cliffs of Dover. Some of the guys had radios, so we got to hear rock and
28 roll music. You know, coming from Great Britain. Let me tell you, going on a troop ship
29 is not pleasurable. The racks are six high. Somewhere in that six is you. You try to get
30 some sleep. I don't do well on the ocean anyway. I don't even deep sea fish because I get
31 seasick. I wasn't seasick, but I was just not up for a cruise. Now, the train ride, we landed

1 in Bremen and it was really cool how they did it. All of us assigned to France were put
2 into one car and that car was going to Paris. Well, you would go along, and the car would
3 be traveling in this direction and all of a sudden, you'd get the sensation that you're
4 stopped, and you feel the bang and you're being switched to a different train. So I stayed
5 on that car—even though I was on several different trains, I stayed in that car the whole
6 way to Paris. And then from Paris was assigned to Orleans, which was the home of Joan
7 of Arc. Let's see, I was only an E4, so my wife was not eligible to travel with me,
8 although I was allowed to have her there if I paid her way. So we saved—I believe it took
9 us five months to save enough for her to get over there. Because we were newlyweds and,
10 you know, we didn't have anything. Her friends would buy her like bath towels and stuff
11 like that. She would box them up and ship them over to me and I would stash them under
12 my bunk. If we had an inspection or anything then I'd have to hide all these boxes. Then
13 my buddies knew that she was coming and that we didn't have any kitchenware or
14 whatever, so they would sneak utensils and plates and cups out of the mess hall. So by
15 the time my wife got there I had a full set of military dishes. At least we could eat. It was
16 funny, it was pretty obvious that de Gaulle was going to kick all the Americans out. It
17 was really easy to get government housing because a lot of the American GI's had
18 already left. So we were able to get a U.S Government apartment. We had government
19 furniture and you know, the stuff she shipped over and the stuff that the guys swiped
20 from the mess hall, we were able to survive pretty well. I bought a 1956 Opal and that
21 was our transportation. Until I bought that, I would take the bus. The bus would come to
22 the housing and it would take us to the (unintelligible) which was where the headquarters
23 was. I was assigned to the United States Communications Zone Europe. Part of my job
24 was in the message center where, on one side of the wall where the cryptographers who
25 had received the message, they would transfer it into English and they would send it to
26 our side and we would determine what was important, what was routine. The important
27 stuff we would put into the reading file for the general. Every morning he would come in
28 and go to the reading file. That's basically where I made all my rank. I got promoted to
29 E5 fairly quickly and then six months later I was promoted to staff sergeant because the
30 superiors really liked the way I operated. I'm jumping back and forth.

31 JS: That's all right.

1 EW: Part of the time was in France and the remainder was in Germany. When de
2 Gaulle eventually said, "Everybody out." We packed everything we owned, including a
3 full-sized poodle into that 1956 Opal and drove from where we lived in Orleans to
4 Mannheim, Germany. I worked in farms which is Worms, but there was no housing
5 available there because of the influx of Americans. I got a government apartment in
6 Mannheim. And it was like driving from night into day. France was bleak and dirty and
7 dreary. Germany was colorful, bright, happy people. The French are pretty dower. The
8 Germans are pretty upbeat and happy. You know, it was funny, it was twenty-five years
9 after the end of World War II, twenty-six years?

10 JS: Right.

11 EW: They seemed to enjoy it. They actually liked us. The French, not so much.
12 Even though we'd saved their butts.

13 JS: So did you enjoy your time there in Germany then?

14 EW: Oh yeah, oh yeah. It was funny, the housing where I lived, almost all those
15 people were in armor units, which were front line units should the Soviets decide to
16 attack.

17 JS: Right.

18 EW: So there would be alerts and they would have to respond immediately and go
19 to the field and disappear for weeks on end. I would respond to my headquarters and after
20 two hours would be released. So there were many times in this whole village of
21 Americans I would be the only male around. So I was pretty much in this one block of
22 housing where we lived. I was pretty much the company daddy. I remember one kid, he
23 was probably four years old, ran headlong into the radiator that provides heat and split his
24 head wide open. So his mom ran and got me and we took him to emergency, got him
25 sewed up. It's funny, I'm holding the kid while the doctor tried to sew him up and the
26 kid's just screaming and squirming and the doctor goes, "That's alright, sonny. Your
27 daddy's right here." I'm not this kid's dad.

28 JS: (Laughs) Right.

29 EW: And it was funny too, how to explain this? A long street with apartments on
30 both sides and the apartments would be in a horseshoe shaped, so I'm not sure how many
31 would be in there, but it was quite a few. Then at the far end, maybe a quarter mile down

1 would be the PX. We would get paid once a month so my wife would go once a month to
2 do grocery shopping. Well, that was also where the regular line troops lived. You know,
3 the young GI's that aren't married. Their barracks were in there. My wife would walk
4 along. She would get off the bus and walk along in her mini skirt and she was pretty hot
5 looking. They would, you know, be truckloads of troops that would just be going nuts
6 over her. Whistling and yelling. She didn't like it too much, but I was pretty proud.

7 JS: Once you made the move from France to Germany, did the job remain exactly
8 the same?

9 EW: Exactly the same, yep. In fact, as I got promoted, I was in charge of one of
10 the ships. Basically, there were four groups and you would run shifts twenty-four hours
11 around the clock. By 6 A.M you would have the general's meeting file prepared. I was
12 promoted from just part of one of the shifts to a shift leader. It was so funny, the 1st
13 sergeant for a company, there was one staff sergeant stripe came available. It was me and
14 another E5 that were up for it. I had six months in grade, the other had fifteen months in
15 grade, but the company first sergeant wanted me to get it. It was pretty obvious when I
16 appeared before the board and he's one of the board members. As they would ask me a
17 question and if he thought I wasn't sure of the answer, he would lean in his chair back
18 and try to signal me what the answer was. You know, I mean it was pretty standard Army
19 type questions. When did the Korean War end? Separated by what parallel? You know,
20 some Vietnam related question and that sort of thing. I did quite well. I got the
21 promotion. It was pretty funny, the first—you know, when I was working at the swing
22 shift, I would eat dinner in the base exchange. I can remember the first night I walked in
23 there, like I said, I'm almost 5'4 so all those stripes came down to my elbows. You could
24 have seen the heads turn the first time I walked in there. Anyway, we were enjoying our
25 time in Europe and I looked around at my future and I got to thinking. Well, what I
26 should have done was applied for OCS (Officer Candidate School) and ask the Army to
27 send me to college, but I decided I wanted to go to college and get a degree. I wasn't sure
28 where I wanted to go with it, but I wanted to complete my college education, at least get a
29 BA degree. And so I did some calculations and the only way I could make it out of the
30 Army in time to start school in August '69 was to go to Vietnam, extend, get inside this
31 six months window, get an early out, and I would have time to—I would be short enough

1 that I could get an early out and be able to start school. So, that's what I did. I
2 volunteered for Vietnam, received orders to go in July '68. I had to extend the month to
3 get into August '69. Once I was in August '69, I was within that six-month window of
4 my regularly scheduled discharge. So I was able to get an early out and was able to start
5 school. We came home and we actually spent a month in Fresno living with my wife's
6 family before I headed out. She got a job, so she would be employed while I was gone,
7 but she continued to live with her parents and save up some money. I was assigned—I
8 wanted to go back into the field so bad I couldn't stand it, but I was assigned to Armor
9 Command Advisory Detachment which was about six miles outside of Saigon. It was on
10 the other side of Tan Son Nhut Air Base. Are you familiar with Saigon at all?

11 JS: Yeah, I am. I've been there a few times.

12 EW: Okay, so you know where Saigon proper is and you know where Tan Son
13 Nhut is?

14 JS: Right, yeah.

15 EW: The approaches to Tan Son Nhut would be right over my head.

16 JS: Okay.

17 EW: The aircraft could probably be fifty feet over my head. The aircraft would
18 probably be three hundred feet in the air. Okay, so Armor Command Advisory
19 Detachment was four officers and two enlisted men. It was a lieutenant colonel, a major,
20 and two captains. And then it was a senior NCO (Non-Commissioned Officer) and a
21 junior level NCO. Basically, what it was, it was—although Nixon had not announced the
22 Vietnamization of the war, that's what we were doing in '68 and '69. We were taking
23 U.S armor and converting it to Vietnamese armor. Total waste of time because armor is
24 supposed to be mobile and hostile and the first thing the Vietnamese officers—when they
25 take their new tanks and their new APC's (Armored Personal Carriers) would be to plant
26 them around their residence and protect their family. They were no longer mobile and far
27 less hostile. But it was basically I was a dog robber and a paper pusher. I was told
28 immediately upon arrival that I would be the dog robber. If you're not familiar with that
29 term, it's to go get what's necessary for the Vietnamese commander. So I've done things
30 like I've traded two AK-47s for a fully prepared chicken dinner for twenty. Almost
31 everything I traded was either captured weapons or captured flags. I would go—the

1 easiest marks were on Long Vinh Post. Long Vinh was about twenty miles away. Those
2 poor bastards would spend a year and never get off that post, never. And so I would show
3 up there with weapons or flags and they were just dying to trade. I would have really
4 good luck. I would trade for c-rations, I would trade for lanterns, I would trade for—I
5 mean, you name it. Wall lockers, and foot lockers. That’s basically what I would do. That
6 was part of my job. The other part of my job, because I taught myself to type during my
7 time in Europe because that was part of my jump was doing paperwork for the lieutenant
8 colonel. I mean, that was probably 1/20 of my job, since there wasn’t a whole lot to do.
9 You know, paperwork type stuff to do. And then I made the decision—I had the choice, I
10 could live on Tan Son Nhut Air Base or I could live out with the Vietnamese. I felt they
11 needed some form of communication with American units. We had a unit of the 101st
12 Airborne, probably three clicks down the road. I made the choice to stay out there at night
13 and had a little place to live. Every night I would do a radio chat with guys at the 101st. I
14 don’t know how I became “yellow hat”, but that was my call sign, yellow hat. I had no
15 yellow hat and I had no clue what it meant. That was me. So I would check in with them
16 every night. Now, talk about harassing fire. I don’t know if you’re familiar with the 122-
17 millimeter Soviet rockets. Unreliable as hell. They will light them off and really not have
18 a clue where they were going. Well, they would shoot at Tan Son Nhut and a lot of times
19 they would fall on us. I never had one hit right on me, but I had one hit twenty yards
20 away and swept right through it. Believe it or not, you get so used to noise. As I said, we
21 were like three hundred feet under the aircraft and they’re side by side runways. So there
22 were constant, constant jet noise. You just get used to it. The only really frightening
23 incident is there was an ammo dump adjacent to us, separated by a concrete wall. I’m
24 going to say a ten-foot high concrete wall.

25 JS: Okay.

26 EW: One day, one of the rockets fell in there and lit it off. For like three days that
27 thing was going off. You’d hear the shells. It’d be the back end of the shell that would fly
28 over your head.

29 JS: Wow, yeah.

30 EW: Yeah, that was a little frightening. The most fun I had there—this was not a
31 fun job and not a fun year. Basically, I was married, I wanted to get it over with. I wanted

1 to survive and get on with life. The most fun I had is we had an Australian armor unit
2 come in and spend three days with us. Basically, they were going out in the field with one
3 of the Vietnamese units we were forming. They were going to do some training with it.
4 So I got to spend three days with Australians and what a great, great group of guys. Just
5 goofier than shit. So much fun. You know, it was just fun.

6 JS: Right. Well, I have some follow up questions to what you're talking about, but
7 unfortunately, we've pretty much run out of time for today. Can we schedule a second
8 session?

9 EW: Absolutely.

10 JS: Okay.

Interview with Earl Wright
Session [2] of [2]
Date 20 August 2010

1 Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech
2 University continuing an Oral History interview with Mr. Earl Wright. Today is August
3 20th, 2010, and this is interview session number two. Okay, last time when we left off you
4 had already begun your second tour. If you don't mind, I have a few follow up questions
5 to something we were talking about last time first. After you got back from Vietnam that
6 first time, while you were home, while you were back in the United States rather, did you
7 keep up with the war? Did you follow the developments of what was going on pretty
8 closely?

9 Earl Wright: Yes, I did. As you're aware, the buildup started just before I left and
10 then continued for the next several years until it reached the 550,000 level. In fact, I was
11 aware of the Tet Offensive of '68 and then I arrived back in Vietnam shortly after that. So
12 I did keep up with it, especially still being in the military. I wanted to know what was
13 going on.

14 JS: Right, what was your reaction to Tet?

15 ER: You know, I have a more historical prospective on it now, but then I thought,
16 "Jesus, we're getting our ass kicked." I was wondering why. Well, it turns out, you know,
17 Tet was an actual victory for the U.S. Yeah, Tet was a victory for the U.S. We pushed
18 them back in everyplace we attacked and, you know, they lost a tremendous amount of
19 men. Is this a good time to talk about my philosophy on the prosecution of the war?

20 JS: Sure, absolutely if you'd like.

21 ER: Okay. Obviously, I've had forty years to think about this and since I've been
22 talking to you, I've thought about it a little more in depth. This era was basically the
23 formulation of what we now call political correctness. I think it was born out of liberal
24 white filth. You've got to remember McNamara and the other advisors, too. Johnson on
25 the prosecution of the war or in the formative years when we bombed Hiroshima and
26 Nagasaki. And so I believe, you know, in the typical white liberal guilt they were not
27 going to bomb North Vietnam back to the Stone Age or, you know, prosecute the war in
28 a way that would have brought about a military victory. I think there were two ways to go

1 in Vietnam. Either all-out war, kick the crap out of them and make them cry uncle, or to
2 do more like we did in the Congo. You know, the Soviets tried to establish a foothold in
3 the Congo right after the success in Cuba. We were able to go in there with Special
4 Forces troops who basically blended in with the populous and we stifled them at every
5 turn. I think we could have done that in Vietnam. You know, it would have taken more
6 Special Forces troops. I think either that or all-out war was the way to go.

7 JS: Okay.

8 EW: This kind of in between, trying to be politically correct, trying to be sensitive
9 to, you know, “We’re fighting Asians and we dropped the atomic bombs that have ever
10 been dropped, we dropped on Asians.” I think that it had a lot to do with it. When I got
11 out of the service, my friends tell me now, “Well, you were an anti-war protester.” And
12 then I say, “No, I wasn’t. I was protesting the way the war was being fought.” I did not
13 think it was right for my brothers to put their lives on the line when we weren’t going to
14 fight to win.

15 JS: Right.

16 EW: You know, I marched in—I’m thinking back, I’m guessing it was Veterans
17 Day Parade, with a group of other Vietnam vets and basically we were not protesting the
18 war, we weren’t anti-war protesters, we were protesting the way the war was being
19 fought.

20 JS: In doing that, did you guys have run-ins with the anti-war protesters?

21 ER: No, because I don’t think they would have understood that we weren’t part of
22 them.

23 JS: Right.

24 ER: I mean, our group was a mixed pack. I’m sure some of them were anti-war,
25 but most of us, we chatted and most of them thought the way I was thinking.

26 JS: So the way the war was prosecuted with things like the bombing halts and
27 limitations?

28 EW: And selected targets. You know, we weren’t allowed to bomb Haiphong
29 Harbor where most events were coming on Soviet ships. You know, there were two
30 reasons for that one, you didn’t want to get into the war with the Soviet Union. I mean,
31 everybody knows what’s going on. There’s no big secret here. Why are we tiptoeing

1 around it. We bombed Hanoi proper, we bombed a lot of the open jungle, you know,
2 thinking there might have been people loaded with goods headed south.

3 JS: Right. All right. One other question I had for you before moving into this
4 second tour. But before getting into that, was there anything else you wanted to say at this
5 point right now about your philosophy on the war?

6 EW: About what?

7 JS: About your take on the war?

8 EW: No, I think I pretty much covered it.

9 JS: Okay, well I have some more questions regarding that towards the end of the
10 interview, but we can cover those later. One other question I had. The day before
11 yesterday when we were talking, you were talking about how things were necessarily lax
12 in Vietnam and the units that you were in, but it wasn't quite the spit shine army. Things
13 were a little bit more lax than they were. Once you got back to the States, and you were
14 still in the Army, but not in Vietnam, was there any difficulty adjusting back to the type
15 of spit-shine Army with all the rules and regulations that go along with that?

16 EW: Not really, it was basically understood, and I think the GIs of today even
17 understand. There's reasons for, you know, acting this way in Iraq or Afghanistan, for
18 instance. And there's reasons for acting this way at Fort Hood. I think those reasons are
19 made pretty clear.

20 JS: Okay, well you touched on this a little bit yesterday, but once you arrived
21 back in Vietnam, could you talk a little bit more, I guess about the unit that you were
22 assigned to and the duties that you would be doing?

23 EW: Okay, when I first got back and I was processing in, I told the captain if I
24 had my—I'd rather go to the field somewhere. He looked at me kind of cross-eyed and
25 said something to the effect of fat chance and assigned me to Armor Command Advisory
26 Detachment. I explained that was just outside of Saigon. So it was on the opposite side of
27 Tan Son Nhut Airbase, a city in Saigon, in a place called Govap. It's pronounced
28 "Goyap". When I got there, they told me the majority of my job would be a dog robber
29 and basically my job was to get access and obtain things that our Vietnamese counterparts
30 wanted or needed. I would trade captured weapons, flags, that sort of thing. Things that
31 the average GI (General Issue) along Binh Post for instance, would never see in a tour of

1 duty. So I would make numerous trips there and swap captured weapons, flags for items
2 that the Vietnamese had requested. I had a choice of whether to stay asleep on the airbase
3 itself in US Barracks or to stay with my Vietnamese counterparts. I chose to stay out on
4 the compound with my Vietnamese counterparts. Basically, to provide them English
5 speaking access on the US forces if necessary. The armor command compound had been
6 attacked and overrun during Tet of '68. Quite a bit of that left when I got there. In fact, I
7 rescued, I think it's called the "Garrison Flag"—it's the US flag with the fringe all around
8 it. I rescued that. It'd been through the battle and had been pretty well neglected until I
9 got there. And so I brought that home with me. I've had several offers of people want to
10 buy it and I won't.

11 JS: Well, a question about your job as the dog robber. Any particularly
12 memorable, humorous type trades that you made? What type of things were the—

13 EW: Yes, there was the—I don't know if you were aware of the typical command
14 structure in an advisory group, but usually the American counterpart would be one rank
15 lower than the Vietnamese counterpart. For instance, the highest rate in America was the
16 lieutenant colonel, normally the highest ranking Vietnamese would be a full colonel. So
17 we had a lieutenant colonel and his counterpart was a full colonel. The colonel was going
18 to host some other Vietnamese officials and he wanted to have a dinner party, so I traded
19 two AK-47s for a fully prepared chicken dinner. I was trying to think of the unit that I
20 made the swap with and I can't remember. You know, I dealt directly with that unit. I
21 told them what I needed, and I told them what I'd give them for it. And so I went and
22 picked it up. It was all prepared and it was in hot containers that I could carry back. They
23 were very pleased.

24 JS: Right. Any other memorable trades?

25 EW: You know, just pretty inconsequential stuff. C-rations, lanterns, wall lockers,
26 footlockers. Yeah—I mean, it would be pretty mundane to the average person.

27 JS: All right. So it's basically just the essentials and things that the ARVN needed
28 to continue?

29 EW: Right, that they couldn't get through normal channels.

1 JS: Right, right. All right. Well, could you talk a little more, I guess about your
2 impressions of those ARVN that you're working with? I know you talked about
3 yesterday how they weren't really a—about how they weren't really aggressive.

4 EW: No. In fact, in reading some of the history of my first tour, you know, the
5 group I was with was advising the 22nd ARVN Infantry Division and they had a pretty lax
6 reputation. My second tour was to convert US Armor to Vietnamese armor. Typically, on
7 the company size. And that would include an M-48 tank probably two to four and 113
8 armored personnel carriers which would be, you know, they would armed, and they
9 would have a 5th caliber machine gun in the front and then on the sides. There would be
10 230s or two M-60s. You know, armor supposed to be hostile and mobile and they would
11 typically take it and implant it around the commander's villa and, you know, make them
12 stationary weapons. You know, I would hear from the advisors that would be assigned to
13 them and, you know, the advisors would be trying to get them out in the field, and they
14 would pretty much refuse. And not all of them. I mean, some of them were really
15 aggressive. They would, you know, go storm through the bush with their new toys. Not
16 all of them. I always thought the majority were not aggressive.

17 JS: Was part of the advisory effort there and converting them over to the ARVN,
18 was part of it also training them as well? Or—

19 EW: Yeah, usually—and it would be as company level, it would be a major, a
20 captain and two NCO's. They would be their advisors as well as their trainers. And that's
21 usually where I got my feedback—was from them. You know, they would come back and
22 say, "Well, this is working" or "This isn't working".

23 JS: All right. In general, how was the relationship between the Americans and the
24 ARVN?

25 EW: Generally, I would call it good. Sometimes, you know, Americans are used
26 to immediate solutions. Sometimes solutions wouldn't be immediate and there would be
27 a little frustration. I would say generally good. My relationship was excellent, and I think
28 that's because I chose to live out there with them. I lost a lot of weight because I ate a lot
29 of Vietnamese food, which didn't quite get along with my American stomach. But I came
30 home weighing 108 pounds, as hard as a rock. And then I had some sort of—I don't want
31 to call it a skin disease, it was more like mushrooms growing on my body because my

1 shower, the only way I could take a hot shower is there was an open water tank that
2 would be heated by the sun. You left it warm enough and then you could take a shower.
3 Well, obviously the water had not been purified, so I had a fungus growing on me when I
4 got home. You know, it was really easy to get rid of. One thing you might find interesting
5 since you're married to a Vietnamese and spend a lot of time there, my stomach had such
6 a problem with their food, it was pretty typical for me to have a bit of Johnny Walker
7 Black on hand. That would be my dinner guest.

8 JS: (Chuckles) Right.

9 EW: It was four bucks a bottle. I would chase the food with the Johnny Walker
10 hoping it would kill any microbes growing.

11 JS: I know the feeling, I know what you mean.

12 EW: Have you eaten the stuff that's like gelatin only it's not colored? I want to
13 say it's the color of putrid, but that's not really a color. That and (unintelligible) I
14 couldn't handle.

15 JS: Yeah, the smell is a little overpowering. My wife still will cook with it
16 occasionally and I have to leave the house.

17 EW: She doesn't chew beetle nut, I hope.

18 JS: No, she doesn't. (Laughs)

19 EW: That's how you could tell the women were over twenty because their teeth
20 were black.

21 JS: Right, oh yeah. Well how about other—aside from the shower, how about
22 other living conditions there with the ARVN? How were the living conditions overall?

23 EW: Pretty primitive. But I mean, I had a bunk. You know, I can't recall what the
24 bathroom conditions were like. I remembered the shower, but obviously it wasn't too
25 bad. I did learn to throw my garbage far, far away if, for instance, I ate some c-rations.
26 Vaguely I would eat c-rations. At first, I'd pitch the garbage in the garbage can like we
27 do now, but the rats were so huge. I mean, just huge and I did not like them sharing my
28 living space. So I would make sure I pitched the garbage far, far away. And we did
29 have—I don't know if they were chameleons or what. I had a number of lizards living on
30 my wall and it was wonderful because the mosquitos would just be overpowering. They
31 helped keep the population down.

1 JS: Right. (Laughs) Well, living there and making the decision to live there with
2 the ARVN, I guess that takes a bit of trust to do that. Did you trust them?

3 EW: Yeah, I did. You know, it was hard to tell good guys from bad guys, but I
4 had relationships with at least three of them that, you know, I knew their names, they
5 knew my name, we would talk daily. And I did, I grew to trust them. They had all been in
6 the field at one point in their career. They were military and they had all been in the field
7 at one point in their career. We did have a female translator that worked with us, but she
8 did not choose to live on base, which I can't blame her. She was in Saigon. They would
9 transport her back and forth by jeep.

10 JS: Was that your primary way of communicating with them? Or had your
11 Vietnamese gotten good enough at that point?

12 EW: I picked up enough Vietnamese and they picked up enough English that we
13 communicated, and it was just basic stuff. It got to the point where they even would be
14 able to joke around with me. On one end of the compound the ARVN soldier's quarters,
15 so their families lived over there. Part of that was a billy goat. A big billy goat that would
16 just roam the compound. I remember a CC (Company Commander) just loved to get the
17 billy goat to but. He'd go up and he'd put a boot between his horns and that would get
18 him fired up and go around butting whatever he could find. They thought that was funny.

19 JS: Right.

20 EW: And I told you about the ammo dump next door getting hit by a rocket and it
21 spent like three or four days exploding.

22 JS: Right.

23 EW: I mean, they didn't even try to control it. It was too dangerous to even try to
24 control.

25 JS: Outside of that, were there many attacks from the VC or the NVA (North
26 Vietnamese Army)?

27 EW: You know, we were never the target. It was always Tan Son Nhut Air Base
28 and the aircrafts that were a target. As I said, the Soviet and the 122-millimeter rockets
29 were just notoriously bad. So there would be short rounds fall on us and short rounds
30 falling on the ammo dump. I would describe my second tour as noisy. I mean, constant
31 aircraft. They were, you know, three hundred feet overhead. Occasional explosions in the

1 middle of the night. Honestly, I would sleep right through. You just get so used to noise
2 because it would startle you. Now, an interesting fact, I'm sure only a few people have
3 done this. Because I was on the opposite side of the air base, if I wanted to go into Tan
4 Son Nhut Air Base for a thing, I had the choice of driving all the way around into Saigon
5 and then coming in the main entrance or I could go around the rear entrance. Pull up to
6 the runway, look both ways, cross that runway, stop with the other one, look both ways,
7 cross that runway and then I put my jeep into the pattern of taxiing aircraft and then pull
8 out on the road. I mean, it's something you would never hear of now. I mean, it would be
9 just absolutely a no-no. Hey, it was war and I guess a lot of the rules didn't apply.

10 JS: Right. Was that where the other American advisors—did they live at Tan Son
11 Nhut? Or

12 EW: Yeah, the officers lived in hotels in Saigon.

13 JS: Okay.

14 EW: The enlisted men lived in barracks on Tan Son Nhut Airbase. In fact, my
15 replacement—I was quite proud of him. My replacement, when he showed up said he and
16 the lower ranking enlisted man, which I didn't have the whole time I was there, would
17 live with the Vietnamese. So he established quarters and the quarters I vacated for both
18 he and the lower rank and the enlisted men. He also thought it was important to establish
19 relationships, as well as providing English speaking voice for the radio.

20 JS: Right, right. So you would the officers and the other enlisted, would the come
21 over in the morning and leave in the evening?

22 EW: Yes, yep.

23 JS: All right.

24 EW: I wouldn't guess there were too many times they worked the full day either.
25 It was pretty lax.

26 JS: Right. About how big was the advisory team there that you were a part of?

27 EW: It was six.

28 JS: Six.

29 EW: Yes, four officers and two enlisted. I believe the TO&E (Table of
30 Organization and Equipment) called for seven, which would have been four officers and
31 three enlisted, but it was only six all of my tour and I think it was only six as I left. It was

1 a lieutenant colonel, a major, two captains, a senior NCO, and a lower EM (Enlisted
2 Military).

3 JS: Could you talk, I guess a little bit about the different jobs that they held?
4 About what all the different assignments that the team had? What they would be doing?

5 EW: It was all an advisory role. All of them had basically the same job.
6 Convincing the Vietnamese that we were operating in their best interest, forming
7 Vietnamese armor units, and trying to get those units into the field. The equipment would
8 come in with American markings. We wouldn't do the actual physical work, but it was
9 changing it over to Vietnamese markings, getting it on their books and taking and
10 forming the actual unit. The manpower part of the unit. And then sending it somewhere
11 into the field.

12 JS: Was there any frustration among you guys, among the Americans as far as the
13 Vietnamese not using the armor the way an American unit would?

14 EW: The four officers that I worked with rarely shared any type of frustration
15 with me. I mean, who am I? I'm a staff sergeant. The guys that would actually be
16 assigned to the units that were sent into the field, they would occasionally return with
17 expressed frustrations.

18 JS: Okay, all right. Well, from what you could gather from living with the ARVN
19 guys there and from your day to day interaction with them, how was their morale from
20 what you could see?

21 EW: You know, it was really hard to detect morale. They, you know, they could
22 not or did not complain about their living conditions because they didn't know any better.
23 They were at least assured of having their meals and a place to stay and sleep, where I'm
24 not sure if they would have been civilians in Vietnam, they would have been guaranteed
25 that. Do you understand?

26 JS: Right.

27 EW: The Americans being there allowed them to be certain of, you know, three
28 meals a day and a place to sleep and a place to have their family.

29 JS: All right. I know obviously, later on after you got back—not to jump too far
30 ahead again but since you made the decision to eventually protest against the war because
31 the way it was handled, had you given much thought to it at this point? I guess what I'm

1 asking is, at this point in the war, how did you, from your prospective, feel things were
2 going and did you think this program and Vietnamization and turning things over to them
3 was going to be successful?

4 EW: No, I thought it was a loser then. It was pretty common that between the
5 American GI's that it was a given that the war was not being prosecuted properly. I mean,
6 everybody from the lowest ranking GI that just got there, up to, you know, the highest
7 level I would deal with all thought it was stupid. We were trying to fight with one arm
8 tied behind our back. Nobody had any confidence of Vietnamization would work.
9 Basically, we're soldiers and take orders and do what we're told. That's all we did. In
10 fact, as I mentioned earlier in our conversation, I thought Tet was the loser when in fact it
11 was a winner. I had that gut feeling, you know, this is American military, we don't lose.
12 In fact, we did. We lost public opinion.

13 JS: So by this point then in your second tour, did you come to the realization in
14 that things were not—it was not going to end with a victory?

15 EW: I had not come to that realization, but the realization was that it was not
16 good. We were not doing what was necessary to win.

17 JS: All right.

18 EW: And you've got to remember, Jason, my two tours were like two different
19 worlds. Totally different worlds. I arrived there at '64. It was 16,000 when my brother
20 arrived in country and I arrived there in '68 with 550,000 in country. A big difference.

21 JS: Right. I don't know, could you see or witness a difference as far as the
22 American presence and how it had changed the war and how it affected Vietnam? Could
23 you see it?

24 EW: Yeah, I think I felt it more. You know, my first tour you'd get on highway
25 one and you wouldn't see another American until you got to Pleiku. Well, you know,
26 going back to Long Binh, that's all you'd see. American presence, everywhere. I'm not
27 sure, I believe the Vietnamese enthusiasm was greater in my first tour than my second
28 tour. It was not that they didn't want us there. My second tour, the novelty had worn off
29 and I'm sure to them it seemed interminable.

30 JS: That brings up another question that I've thought about before. With your
31 work with the ARVN, I'd like to ask you this. I've seen where some historians and

1 people who viewed the war from hindsight at this point have said that one of the things
2 that may have happened was that early on—perhaps the ARVN, as you said, the
3 enthusiasm was there and were perhaps even more committed. But once the Americans
4 fully got involved, the ARVN were in some ways kind of pushed aside. We're going to
5 take over the war and the ARVN, at that point, kind of stood back. Do you think that's an
6 accurate portrayal?

7 EW: That could be. Understand, I wasn't involved at that level.

8 JS: Right.

9 EW: That kind of assessment. I would say it makes sense to me. Early on when
10 you say, "You're going to be their advisor, they'll fight this way." And we show up with
11 half a million troops and say, "Okay, we're going to start kicking butt." And then we say,
12 "The American people aren't really behind this. We're going to start turning this back
13 over to you." I can see where their enthusiasm might be dim at that point.

14 JS: All right. Well, changing the subject a little bit I guess, how did you spend
15 your free time and things like that during the second tour?

16 EW: Basically, it was a routine. Around five o'clock or six o'clock I would jump
17 in my jeep. Like I said, it was three clicks down the road to get to the 101st Airborne. I'd
18 go buy three beers. I'd go back to the compound, write my wife a letter. Like I said, I was
19 married during this tour. I would either make a tape or write a letter. I'd have my beers
20 and go to bed. I'd usually do a radio check just before I went to bed.

21 JS: So this second tour then, was it much more of a daily routine then?

22 EW: Yeah, and we discussed this a little bit during the first part of the interview.
23 My first tour I was eighteen years old and there weren't a whole lot of Americans there. It
24 was fun, a lot of fun. My second tour, I was married, I was older. I made the decision to
25 get out of the service. It was routine. It was no fun involved and just routine. It was
26 basically, "Okay, what do I need to do to make sure I stay alive and get home?"

27 JS: Right. Well, discussing the routine, could you talk about a typical day and
28 how it would be structured?

29 EW: It depended. If the colonel had some paperwork for me to do, I would
30 obviously hang around and do whatever needed to be done. If not, sometimes he would
31 get word from his counterpart, the colonel in charge, or I would get word through the

1 enlisted ARVN troops that I've been around. "We'd like to have such and such, can you
2 see about getting it for us?" So sometimes I'd just jump in a jeep and take off and go seek
3 what they wanted. Most times I was successful and sometimes not. Sometimes we'd have
4 to search a little harder.

5 JS: Right.

6 EW: But I'll tell you, you walk into—you'd drive into Long Binh Post and you'd
7 get within the perimeter and the farther inside you'd get, you'd come upon MP's
8 (Military Police) in full dress uniforms wearing white gloves, blowing whistles, directing
9 traffic. You know those guys never get out into the war. If you show up with artifacts that
10 have been captured, they're going to want to trade.

11 JS: And these weapons that you were trading, were they coming from the ARVN?

12 EW: Correct. And they would know who I was, and they would channel them to
13 me.

14 JS: All right. And the drive up to Long Binh, was it a fairly safe drive?

15 EW: You know, I never felt threatened. You know, anybody who's been in a
16 warzone type of alert when they get back—well, I was hyper alert on the drive to Long
17 Binh. Sometimes I would be by myself and sometimes I would have ARVN
18 accompanying me. I was always armed. I felt like I knew what I was doing and was
19 prepared. Like I said, you'd see U.S troops everywhere, so I didn't feel completely
20 exposed.

21 JS: Right.

22 EW: You know, it was like my first tour. If they wanted me, they could have had
23 me, but I wasn't a prime target.

24 JS: How long of a drive was it?

25 EW: This is best guess from an old guy memory. About twenty miles.

26 JS: All right. Would part of it be going—would you actually be going through
27 Saigon?

28 EW: No, you would angle off—oh, I can't remember what the road or the
29 highway was. You would go through Govap and then if you go onto Saigon, you'd fly to
30 the right. If you go elsewhere, you'd fly to the left. You'd fly to the left, go to a little bit
31 more of the village and then out into the countryside, which was rice patties all the way.

1 JS: Well, anything else about the actual job that we should cover that we haven't?
2 EW: No, it was pretty mundane stuff.
3 JS: Alright, well did you get a chance to go on R&R on this tour?
4 EW: Yes, I did.
5 JS: Okay.
6 EW: I met my wife in Hawaii. That would have been April 1969. I was just
7 amazed at how well I was treated. We went to—we met in Honolulu and caught a flight
8 to Kauai, where we spent the week in Kauai. I rented a mustang convertible and we had a
9 great time. One evening, we were going to dinner at this certain place and, you know, it
10 was a little before dinner so we stopped into a bar and we sat at a table and a few
11 moments later, somebody walks in and says, "Who has the mustang convertible out
12 there." And I stood up and said, "I do." And he said, "Well, it's got a flat tire." And I go,
13 "Oh darn, I'll head out to change the tire." They would not let me change the tire. It was
14 obvious. I was real tan and short hair. It was real obvious I was a GI on R&R from
15 Vietnam. They would not let me change the tire. All the guys jumped up from the bar and
16 the guy who had spotted it, they all went and changed the tire. They came in, I was going
17 to buy them a round for them doing that and they would not accept it and then bought me
18 a round. Unbelievable, just treated so well. And that's not what I was expecting because
19 you'd heard all the crap. This was '68 and '69, right? You heard all the crap going on in
20 the States. Much different.
21 JS: Right, so you didn't run into any of that negative treatment at all?
22 EW: No, no.
23 JS: All right.
24 EW: I was just so tickled.
25 JS: Right. Was it a week R&R?
26 EW: Yeah, yeah.
27 JS: All right. How much time did you have left in your tour whenever you took
28 the R&R?
29 EW: Let's see, it was April and I extended a month. So May, June, July, August;
30 four months to go.
31 JS: Okay. All right.

1 EW: During that time, I told you my intent was to start college, to get—within six
2 months, to get an early out and then start college. I had to take the ACT and the only way
3 to do that was to go to Special Services at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. They would schedule
4 it. I actually took the ACT at Tan Son Nhut.

5 JS: Right.

6 EW: Which allowed me to walk right out of Vietnam onto the campus of Fresno
7 City College.

8 JS: Okay. Let's see. While you were there those last few months, anything else
9 we should discuss? Any memorable moments, funny moments, anything like that?

10 EW: I told you the Australians showed up and they were hilarious.

11 JS: Right.

12 EW: They spent two or three days with us. They actually brought their tanks and
13 their APC's into our compound and then basically camped out there. You know, their
14 tanks were British tanks. I'd seen photos which I had never seen, so it was interesting to
15 look at their equipment and it was interesting to sit around at night. Almost like camping
16 out, listening to their stories and they would harass each other just like typical American
17 GIs do. You know, if you can get past the accent, they aren't that much different than we
18 are. In fact, I firmly believe that Australians—and this is even history from after I got out
19 of the military, but I actually believe Australians are more like Americans like any other
20 people from anywhere in the world.

21 JS: So you spent about three days with them?

22 EW: Yeah, something like that.

23 JS: All right, any other—did you have any other of your tours, interaction with
24 any other nation? Soldiers from other countries like the Philippines or the Koreans or
25 anything like that?

26 EW: You know, I saw Koreans not really to interact with them. You know, you
27 go on Tan Son Nhut Air Base and you see everything. It was—I'm thinking it was my
28 first tour. I saw an aircraft that I didn't recognize, and it was a British aircraft of some
29 sort.

30 JS: Well, anything else from that second tour we should discuss before talking
31 about coming home?

1 EW: No, I mean basically the second tour was spend a year, stay alive, get the
2 hell out of here.

3 JS: All right, well once your DEROS (Date Estimated Return From Overseas)
4 came up and it was time to go home, what was your feeling about going home?

5 EW: I was really excited, I was a little nervous of, “Geez, I’m going to be out of
6 the military. I’ve been here almost six years. It’s the only adult life I know.” But I was
7 enthusiastic about starting school, enthusiastic about getting home to my wife. You
8 know, typically worries. You know, how am I going to make a living? Is the GI bill going
9 to be enough to live on? That sort of thing. Am I going to be able to complete my
10 education in four years?

11 JS: Right. Did you experience any of the short-timers syndrome of being a little
12 more paranoid towards the last few days or no?

13 EW: Yeah, but there wasn’t a specific threat, so I didn’t go through what US
14 combat troops might have felt.

15 JS: Right. All right. Did you have that experience at the end of your first tour?
16 The short-timer’s syndrome?

17 EW: No, I didn’t. You know, I know it’s so hard for somebody to grasp, but this
18 first tour was just fun. I was either fun or extremely frightening. Like you’re on a
19 rollercoaster which is extremely frightening, you know. When it’s over, boy, that was
20 exhilarating.

21 JS: All right, well let’s see—sorry, I forgot the question.

22 EW: That’s all right.

23 JS: I’m sorry about that. I remember now. Well, was there any sort of out-
24 processing? If so, how long of a process was it?

25 EW: Uh, yes there was. It took place in Oakland Army Terminal and it seemed
26 interminable. But it was about, I don’t know, about twenty-seven hours, I guess.
27 Basically, the out-processing, we were awake and sitting around waiting, you know, a lot
28 more than we were out processing. So when they did pay you, release you, it was such a
29 great feeling of relief and obviously we’re all in uniform and heading for—I had to go to
30 San Francisco International Airport to catch a flight home to Fresno and I know I shared
31 a cab over there. I can’t tell you with you, bunch of guys got together and shared a cab. I

1 was a little apprehensive how we were going to be greeted in our uniforms, but there
2 were really no incidents. I mean, just got in, got a plane ticket, and got ready for the
3 flight. I was really, really proud of my wife and my mother who somehow got access
4 onto the air terminal at Fresno, which would be impossible to do now. They rolled out a
5 red carpet for me right below the ramp. Probably a half a dozen of my friends and
6 relatives were there. And so that was pretty cool.

7 JS: So then it was a good homecoming then?

8 EW: Yup, yup.

9 JS: All right. At that point, you were completely out of the Army at that point?

10 EW: Yes.

11 JS: Okay, how long did you take off before you started into college?

12 EW: Less than a week.

13 JS: Oh wow.

14 EW: It was—I can't remember the days exactly, but I got home Thursday and
15 started school Tuesday. You know, seriously I walked out of Vietnam onto a campus.

16 JS: All right. What did you major in there at Fresno City?

17 EW: Well, this is interesting. I had no major. I had no a clue what I wanted to do.
18 So my first semester I took a current events class because my thought process was,
19 "Well, I've been living it, so it should be a fairly easy class." The instructor of that class I
20 liked a lot. He was the advisor to the school newspaper, and I thought, "Well, I worked
21 on the school newspaper in high school." I wasn't a writer or anything, but I sold
22 advertising or something. And so well I said, "Well, I like this guy. I'm going to take his
23 class next semester." Well, the first day of class he said, "Does anybody here like
24 sports?" You've got to remember, this was '68 and '69 era. Lots of protests going on,
25 sports wasn't very popular. I was the only one in the class who raised my hand. I liked
26 sports. He said, "Good, you're the sports editor of the *Rampage* this semester." I had
27 nearly a clue what I was doing, but it turned out that lead to a job at the local daily
28 newspaper writing sports all through college. That became my major and my career. I
29 was a journalism major and it turned out I'm a great writer. I'm a good reporter, a good
30 editor and that's what I did with the rest of my life.

31 JS: Okay, did you cover sports or move into other things?

1 EW: Yep. Not my whole career, but all through college I covered sports. My first
2 job away from here was not sports, but it turned out—I've had hiring and firing
3 responsibility for about thirty years. Sports editors and sports writers actually make the
4 best reporters. I cannot tell you why, but I think it's because sports is about detail, so
5 sports writers tend to pay attention to detail.

6 JS: Are you still involved in the newspaper business now?

7 EW: Jumping ahead, I was in the newspaper business for twenty-seven years. I
8 worked at seven different newspapers all over California. I dragged my wife all over hell.
9 But as the news media became more and more leftist, liberal thoughts that did not fit me.
10 So in '97 I gave it up, started my own custom publishing company. Basically, I produced
11 newspapers and magazines for specific clients. Which was fine until the housing crash of
12 2008 in the State of California. All my clients went broke and so I went broke with them.
13 So I pretty much closed up my business and semi-retired. That's why I have time to
14 spend time with you.

15 JS: Right.

16 EW: I had college kids work for me and so my few remaining clients I just turned
17 over to them because they didn't need me. They were well trained and knew what to do,
18 so this gives them something to generate some money to get them through college.

19 JS: Well, I didn't mean to jump too far ahead there.

20 EW: That's all right.

21 JS: Another question I had for you, was it during this time at Fresno City College
22 that you became involved with not anti-war protests, but protesting against the way the
23 war was handled?

24 EW: Yeah, it was real obvious who the vets were because we were all twenty-
25 two, twenty-three versus the seventeen and eighteen year olds. So we would get together
26 and have coffee and do that sort of thing and chat. You know, we all had different
27 experiences, but we all had the same thought. "Gee, we can't win if they won't let us
28 fight correctly." What we thought needed to be done.

29 JS: I guess, how active were you guys?

30 EW: Not that active, it was pretty much a loose group. Now, some of them did go
31 onto form an anti-war faction that, you know, joined the other war efforts on campus.

1 Later, I did two years there and went to Fresno State for two years. You know, some of
2 them moved to that, I did not. I was not anti-war hippie. Although, I didn't get a haircut
3 for three years. I had my hair pretty far down my back, but that was not because I was an
4 anti-war protestor.

5 JS: Right. What kind of activities would you guys be involved in?

6 EW: I recall marching in a particular Veterans Day parade.

7 JS: Okay.

8 EW: And the signs we carried were related to not letting us fight. Now, we also
9 attempted to carry a U.S flag upside down and that was our thought of, you know, we're
10 in trouble, we don't do this correctly. This will tell you we weren't true anti-war
11 protestors. The organizers brought a chaplain from World War I. This guy was old. And
12 he asked us, "Will you please turn the flag over correctly?" And we did. Nobody was
13 going to tell this old chaplain that, "Up yours, we're going to carry it the way we want."
14 We complied with his request. That tells you right there we were not true anti-war
15 protestors.

16 JS: Did you have other people that, I guess, misunderstood your purpose, and
17 tried to lump you guys in with the anti-war?

18 EW: Oh yes, hell yes. You've got to understand, my classes once I got to Fresno
19 State, my major was journalism. So my bosses were with people who run newspapers
20 throughout the west coast now. They all say, "Earl, you were an anti-war protestor." I
21 said, "No, I wasn't. See, you don't understand." You know, they're big time lefties and
22 Obama supporters. I am not an Obama supporter. I was not a John McCain supporter.
23 You know, one of the reasons I got out of the business is like—I have a friend who runs a
24 very large influential newspaper in the Bay Area. I ask him, "How can you sit there in the
25 news budget meetings and make decisions with your bias thought process?" "Oh no, I'm
26 not bias." "Oh hell you're not, you are!" And they are. Trust me, they're my friends, I
27 love them dearly. They are just so out to lunch when it comes to seeing the real world.
28 And it's because they hang around with people that think like they do, they go to
29 universities who teach like they think. So they never get out of their little sphere. They've
30 made the rule, but it goes out the window. In fact, I'll be leaving here in a month for a
31 four-day camping trip and three-day golfing trip. We spend a week together. We fish and

1 golf and I am not allowed to talk politics. Well, that goes out the window real fast
2 (Laughs).

3 JS: (Laughs) Right. Well, let me ask you this. That's one of the themes today
4 about the media and that bias. Was the bias prevalent at the time that you got into the
5 newspaper business?

6 EW: Oh, hell yes. Hell yes.

7 JS: Did you realize that as you were getting in?

8 EW: No, no I didn't. Let me tell you an incident that happened when I worked up
9 in Redding, California. I worked up there from '79 to '85. So you can kind of gage the
10 time period. I was the assistant city editor and I was sitting with the city editor and we
11 were going through resumes because we needed to hire a reporter. And he comes to a
12 resume, a young man had put down his Air Force career as well as his short newspaper
13 career. The city editor turned to me and said, "Why would they put that on there?" Like it
14 was useless. I'm going, "This guy's a fucking idiot." Excuse my language, Jason.

15 JS: Sure. No problem.

16 EW: That's exactly what I thought, you know. You know, I was frustrated. I look
17 back and how it taught me so much about leadership. You know, it taught me just—the
18 military is the last true meritocracy in America. It doesn't matter what color you are.
19 Sure, there are incidents of racism, but as an institution the Army only sees green, the
20 navy only sees blue, you know. I'm sorry, I got off on a tangent there.

21 JS: No, no—

22 EW: I started to go far off field.

23 JS: That's quite alright, that is quite alright. Well, as you're going through college
24 and you're preparing for a career. Are you still following the war and the media? Are you
25 still paying close attention to it?

26 EW: Yes.

27 JS: Yeah.

28 EW: Now understand, I worked a lot. I not only worked at the newspaper, a friend
29 of mine had an air conditioning business and I was kind of a gopher for him and then in
30 the summers I worked in a peach cannery, canning peaches because the money was great.

1 But I did, I took a newspaper, a daily newspaper, read it every day. I watched the news
2 when I didn't happen to be working. I did. I was interested, so I kept up with it.

3 JS: Well, along the lines of what we've just been talking about with the bias and
4 the media, what was your take on the media's coverage of Vietnam as you were reading
5 the newspapers? As you were reading it, did you think this is a load of crap or did you
6 tend to agree?

7 EW: Absolutely, absolutely.

8 JS: Okay.

9 EW: And it just irritated me to no end that I was being trained to write straight
10 news with no opinion in it and it was allegedly straight. And it was, you know, once
11 you're trained that way, it's easy to pick out. Even with the nightly news on CBS, you
12 know, it was fairly easy to pick out. That would irritate me to no end.

13 JS: Well, as things in Vietnam began to wind down and eventually with the fall of
14 Saigon of course, what was your reaction to the way things concluded?

15 EW: Basically, I'm watching and thinking, "I can't believe this is happening, I
16 can't believe this is happening." You know, you watch the videos of the helicopters
17 landing on top off the embassy and then landing on the aircraft carriers and they push the
18 choppers over to the side and they make room for the next one. You go, "Holy shit, what
19 is going on?" I don't know, I felt that it's a lot. Why are we giving up? Why are we
20 quitting? What the heck has happened to the US military? You know, I also felt for, you
21 know, the Vietnamese that I'd grown close to. What the hell is going to happen to them?
22 Especially like—I'm thinking that the NCO's that I hung around, the ARVN NCOs. They
23 have the potential to be able to take care of themselves, but what about our interpreter. I
24 mean, she's a female twenty-two years old or whatever. You know, how is she survived?
25 They're going to just kill her, devastate her. Make her prisoner, send her to a camp.

26 JS: Right.

27 EW: So I did have concern.

28 JS: All right. Well, before wrapping things up in the interview, if you don't mind,
29 I'd like to ask you a few more of these broad questions about how the war was handled
30 and some of those type issues.

31 EW: Okay.

1 JS: All right. First of all, we've touched on some of these things a little bit, but
2 looking back on your experiences, looking back on the way Vietnam was handled, how
3 do you feel about American involvement in Vietnam to begin with? Do you think that we
4 should have gotten involved in Vietnam?

5 EW: Okay, if I had to pick a strategy, I would pick the strategy more like what we
6 did in the Congo. I would send Special Forces troops in and we have apparently done this
7 a lot in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although, Pakistan does not advertise it. I think I
8 would have done it more that way. The people did not necessarily trust the South
9 Vietnamese Government. I think it's similar to the problem we're going to have in Iraq
10 and Afghanistan where the government is not necessarily trustworthy. They're basically
11 seeing dollar signs and they're going to take as much as they can, you know. Screw the
12 country, I'll go live in Paris.

13 JS: Well, how do you feel about your own service?

14 EW: I'm damn proud of my own service. You know, it's funny, I hate people like
15 John Kerry. I have no respect for Kerry, I despise him. I will live long enough to piss on
16 Jane Fonda's grave. The reason I despise John Kerry is I completely understand how he
17 got his three Purple Hearts. My first tour in Vietnam I did far more than you deserve some
18 sort of award. I was awarded the Army Commendation Medal and I was shocked when
19 they had the award ceremony and I got it. My second tour, I was awarded a Bronze Star. I
20 go, "What the hell is this for?" And that was, you know, that overall mentality was how
21 Kerry got his awards. Basically, he awarded it to himself. You know, I'm not saying I
22 awarded the Bronze Star, but it was, you know, my lieutenant colonel going, "Good job."
23 And giving me the Bronze Star. Wow. I've had the opportunity in the last—I'm going to
24 say it was the mid-nineties—no, it had to be early 2000's to get to know some of the
25 POWs (Prisoners of War) from Vietnam. Yeah, we had a premier of the movie *Return*
26 *with Honor*, and a guy who'd become a friend of mine was a commanding general of the
27 144 Interceptor Wing that shipped out of Fresno. He had asked me to be part of his group
28 putting this on, the premier of this movie. As part of it we brought in five POW's. One of
29 them was Charlie Plum, he stayed overnight at my house. I hosted him. They are such
30 fine people and to go through what they went through is just heartbreaking. You'd think
31 about all the guys who had severe PTSD and then—I'm rambling again.

1 JS: No, not at all.

2 EW: Are you aware that a judge recently ruled that the Stolen Valor Act is
3 invalid?

4 JS: I did hear that.

5 EW: Because it's freedom of speech to explain you were awarded medals you
6 were not awarded and did not deserve. Well, stuff like that just irritates the hell out of me.
7 We have beggars on the street corners who claim to be homeless Vietnam Vets and I
8 know they're not, they're not. But what can I do about it? I've talked to the Fresno PD
9 about, "Hey, let's start picking these guys up under the Stolen Valor Act." Well, now it's
10 been ruled invalid. So you know, it's really frustrating. Sorry to be a rambler.

11 JS: No, not at all. Not at all. Next question, what's your opinion of US policy
12 towards Vietnam today and modern Vietnam? And what do you think about trade
13 business and that type of thing and veterans going back?

14 EW: I whole heartedly support it. I actually have sort of connection. A friend of
15 mine's ex-wife now works for an entity out of Fresno City College. Probably similar to
16 your entity. She is the trade representative. This is a big agricultural area, so ag. trade is a
17 big deal. She works very closely with Vietnamese here and they have established
18 relationships in Vietnam and, you know, enhanced trade between this area which has a
19 large Southeast population in Southeast Asia. I wholeheartedly support it.

20 JS: All right. Have you ever given any thought to going back yourself?

21 EW: Uh yeah, I took my wife to Hong Kong just prior to the conversion of Hong
22 Kong in the late nineties. God, my memory's zapped. Anyway, she didn't really want to
23 go to Vietnam, but I wanted to kind of show her what it was like. The weather, etc. So I
24 took her to Hong Kong. That's as close as we got. Now, I would go back to Vietnam
25 myself. I would love to go, you know, just bumming around in Kon Tum Province and
26 just see what it's like.

27 JS: All right. Well, is there anything else you'd like to say? Anything else that we
28 haven't covered before wrapping the interview up?

29 EW: No. As I've grown older, my opinions have become more firm. You know, I
30 obviously believe I could have done a better job of prosecuting that war than the people

1 who were in charge. But I have a fat chance of getting elected, so I guess my line in life is
2 to complain about it.

3 JS: Right. Well, I'll guess I'll go ahead and bring the interview to a close.

4 (Interview audio ends)