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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Sam Sorrels
Conducted by Jason Stewart
Date May 5th 2011
Transcribed by Aaron Kellerhals**

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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. Sam Sorrels. Today is May
3 5th, 2011, I'm in Lubbock, Texas, in the Special Collections Library on the campus of
4 Texas Tech and Mr. Sorrels is joining me by phone. Okay, why don't we begin if we
5 could, if you could tell me a little bit of biographical information about yourself. First of
6 all, when and where were you born?

7 Sam Sorrels: Okay, I was born in Waco, Texas in October of 1949. Grew up
8 mostly there, did travel out to West Texas to Midland and Odessa area, and Beaumont
9 and Houston with my stepfather who was in the oil and gas business. But graduated from
10 La Vega High School, which is in Waco, and lived there for eighteen-and-a-half years. I
11 got my draft notice there and was waiting for my acceptance into the University of Texas.
12 I know that's not Tech, but that's okay. (Laughs)

13 JS: (Laughs) Right. Yes, sir. All right.

14 SS: Got that the second week of basic training.

15 JS: Yes, sir. All right. Well, before we get into your entrance into the military, I
16 guess would you mind talking a little bit more about growing up and what that was like
17 for you during that time period.

1 SS: Okay. Well, you know the '50s were pretty laidback compared to what all the
2 hectic things kids go through today. We traveled a lot. Like I said, my stepfather was
3 with the oil and gas industry and so we moved a lot. There was a lot of different schools,
4 a lot of different towns and cities, stuff that you had to adjust to. But I ended up going
5 back. We went back to Waco after my mom and stepfather got a divorce, it was an oil
6 accident out in West Texas, in Midland. He was injured and had to leave that industry,
7 and so we came back to Waco, and they finally ended up getting a divorce and she
8 actually remarried my father. I stayed there with them for most of the rest of the
9 remainder of the years, and the last two years I lived with my grandparents to kind of
10 help them out. Did chores and stuff around there. But it was a typical—growing up in the
11 '50s, we had a lot of freedoms. You could go out and run around and you stayed out at
12 night. We slept under the stars a lot of times when my cousin would come up.

13 JS: Right.

14 SS: We would play football, baseball, whatever from daylight until dusk. No air
15 conditioning then, so it was plenty warm, and I don't think I had air conditioning until I
16 got out of the Army. (Laughs)

17 JS: Right.

18 SS: So it was pretty warm and, you know, we were definitely not a rich family,
19 we were on the lower end of the income scale. So I had to work most summers after I got
20 up past twelve years old. I had my own paper route in the morning, and I'd get up and
21 throw that. And then, I'd help my grandfather with his painting business or my dad laying
22 bricks. So I learned a lot of different manual skills and trades coming up. When I
23 worked—when I lived with my grandparents, the last two years I worked at a service
24 station and ended up basically running that service station for most of the—when I came
25 back, especially I did. It was pretty typical, a lot of things that you can do that you can't
26 do now. Like we could go out hunting and things, and we didn't have to worry so much
27 about that around town. Carrying a rifle or something in the back of your pickup wasn't a
28 big deal.

29 JS: Right. (Laughs)

30 SS: (Laughs) Fishing, we weren't but a few blocks from the river, so we tried to
31 make time for fishing and things. Like I said, it was pretty safe environment. You go out

1 and you could stay out almost all night and not everybody worry about you getting
2 abducted or something. So it was a pretty free atmosphere, good place to grow up, good
3 time to grow up.

4 JS: Right, all right. Well, as a kid growing up there in Texas, did you pay much
5 attention to, I guess what was going on in the world with the Cold War and American
6 involvement in that?

7 SS: Yes, I did. I had—you know, going back to when I was in junior high, and
8 President Kennedy got assassinated and we were a hundred miles away from that. So we
9 started paying more attention to it. I had a really good oral history teacher in the ninth
10 grade that got us involved in a lot of—in looking out for what's going on in the world,
11 and this, that and the other. So from at least the ninth grade on, pretty much a lot of
12 interest in what was going on. Had one girl in our class that was a relative of Fidel
13 Castro, and so we talked a lot about Castro and then about the Bay of Pigs when that
14 happened. Then a little bit about Vietnam, I mean it wasn't—everybody knew that we
15 were over there, and we kind of understood the Domino Theory and why we were going
16 to be putting our self at battle. And of course, the Cold War with Russia and the Berlin
17 Airlift. I mean, we looked through all of that, so it was pretty heightened awareness. We
18 did the bomb drills in school like everybody did. If you get a nuclear attack, stick your
19 head under the desk.

20 JS: Right. (Laughs)

21 SS: But that's like sticking your head in the sand, it doesn't do much good.
22 (Chuckles) But you know, we grew up in that atmosphere and it was what it was.

23 JS: Yes, sir. All right. Well, I know you mentioned the Kennedy Assassination.
24 Could you talk, I guess a little bit about what you remember about that?

25 SS: This is going to be getting kind of spooky to you, guy. Me and my cousin
26 were at University Junior High School, and he was president of the Science Club and I
27 come up behind him and playingly did my fingers and went "Pow". I said, "All right,
28 President. You're dead." It wasn't two minutes, you know, two, three minutes later we
29 were in class, and they announced the President had been shot up in Dallas. He and I just
30 looked at each other, we were shocked to say the least. Of course, we watched Jack Ruby
31 and Lee Harvey Oswald through the court room and followed that extensively. The

1 funeral with Jackie and John-John and Caroline. It made a big impression, and you kind
2 of wondered about the politics and how things were being blamed. Right or wrong, on the
3 Bay of Pigs was a kind of impetus for that. It was the Cold War; you really couldn't tell
4 because of Oswald going to Russia and stuff. So there was always that question in the
5 back of your mind, was that really what happened? Or was it the crackdown on the crime
6 from Robert Kennedy that he was doing with the mafia? Or—there was always that
7 question and we never really got a good answer to it. I guess it's still a conspiracy to a lot
8 of folks, but you know, so much time has passed that if they ever decided to publish
9 what's out there, then we'll all know. I doubt it'll be in my lifetime.

10 JS: Right, right. Probably not mine either.

11 SS: Yeah.

12 JS: All right. Well, I know you were mentioning a moment ago that Vietnam was
13 starting to get started and—was getting started rather and was heating up while you were
14 going through your last few years of high school there. Were you concerned at all about
15 the draft as you approached eighteen years old and approached graduating from high
16 school?

17 SS: Well, yeah, a little bit. At the last year of high school, I graduated in '68, so in
18 January of that year we all heard about the Tet Offensive and how so many Americans
19 were killed over there. That's really when all the questions that started to come up about
20 why we're over there. Of course, we all knew the draft was in effect, we didn't have
21 lottery numbers at that time, that came then in '69. We all knew we were going to be
22 draft age. I was already draft age, but I was in school. That's one of the reasons I was
23 planning on—you know, I didn't really care one way or the other if I got into the Army
24 or not. I was really trying to get into college because I wanted to be in the medical
25 profession. I had completed all my tests and had submitted my paperwork to three
26 schools. I'd even actually had a scholarship to Baylor if I'd wanted to go in math, but that
27 wasn't what I wanted to study. I had my three options out there, and there wasn't much I
28 could do other than submit the paperwork and you either get accepted or not. When
29 September rolled around and I hadn't gotten a letter back, then I started to kind of,
30 "Okay. Then, there's a real good possibility I'm going to get drafted here." I had a
31 National Guard Army Reserve recruiter that lived right down the street, and I used to date

1 his daughter. He and I talked about it a little bit and I actually ended up getting a draft
2 notice and he said, “Well, you know, you can go down and join and get into the area you
3 want.” He said, “You don’t have to be drafted.” And so, that’s what I did. I went down
4 and I joined, and asked for the medical, and that’s what I got.

5 JS: Okay.

6 SS: I was real pleased with that, that I at least got into the field that I wanted to
7 work in.

8 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right. Well, how long after graduating—or are you still in
9 high school when you receive that draft notice?

10 SS: No, it was after graduation. We graduated in May, and I got the notice the day
11 after my nineteenth birthday. (Laughs) I went and joined, and I joined on November 4th.

12 JS: Okay.

13 SS: So it was less than a week that I got the notice that I went down and joined.
14 Cause like I say, I did talk to—his name was Doc Everett.

15 JS: Okay.

16 SS: We discussed it and I went down and joined on November 4th.

17 JS: Right, all right. What was it about the Medical Corps, and I guess about
18 medicine in general that interested you?

19 SS: Well, I guess it’s always been—you always want to make a difference in
20 somebody’s life or make a difference in your own life and do something positive. I really
21 wanted to work in that area. You see a lot of folks around that can’t afford medical care
22 and it would be a way—at that time, especially cause like I say we were on the poor side
23 growing up, it would’ve been a way to help my family out and it would provide a good
24 future for my wife and children. It seemed like the right thing to do. So I was always
25 interested and very good at biology and chemistry and math, and the science-related
26 fields. So that’s kind of what I wanted to do.

27 JS: Okay.

28 SS: Give it a shot anyway.

29 JS: Right, all right. Well, after going down there and joining on November 4th,
30 how long did you have before you reported for basic?

31 SS: It was less than a week.

1 JS: Oh wow.

2 SS: Yeah.

3 JS: Right.

4 SS: Yes, they signed me up. By that weekend I was up in Dallas doing the

5 induction physical and then straight out to Fort Bliss in El Paso. Course they put you

6 through a battery of tests during that. I mean, tests to find out what your abilities are. I

7 ended up testing out pretty good, at the very top of the class in that particular one, and

8 they made me the leader to bring everybody out to Fort Bliss. Same thing at Fort Bliss

9 and Fort Sam. I graduated at the top of class at both of those. Got a trophy for trainee-of-

10 the-cycle and some other kind of recognition at Fort Sam and at Fort Bliss as well.

11 JS: Okay, all right. Well, in order to be qualified to get into the medical side of

12 things, did you have to score a certain—I know that you did so easily, but did you have

13 to, I guess qualify by exam?

14 SS: Yeah. Yeah, they gave you aptitude tests at the beginning, and that's kind of

15 what I was talking about. When they tested you.

16 JS: Okay.

17 SS: For a full day at the induction center and then during basic training you were

18 also tested again.

19 JS: Okay.

20 SS: The first week that you were there or so. Getting shots and beginning the

21 training, and learning the deal, but we did aptitude testing and like I said, I tested out. It

22 was go until you drop, it was kind of the last man standing thing.

23 JS: (Chuckles) Okay.

24 SS: It was me and a guy from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), he

25 had just graduated from MIT, and I ended up beating him on that last score.

26 JS: Wow.

27 SS: I could not believe that, but I said, "That's a pretty good school I went to, I

28 guess." So they tested you aptitude-wise. Like I said, I was real strong in the science and

29 math, so I didn't have any problem meeting the requirements for the Medical Corps. I

30 would've also qualified for artillery cause there's a lot of math involved in that.

31 JS: Right.

1 SS: After I got out of basic, they wanted me to go to leadership training school.
2 They call it LPC (Leadership Preparatory School) at Fort Sam, and I got there, I guess a
3 little late in the evening, and they said, “No, that class is already full.” So I didn’t get to
4 do that, but they put me in truck-driver training for all the things that you can think of for
5 a week and then I drove guard duty for another week. Then, they finally started up the
6 medical training class. I said, “Well, this is different.”

7 JS: Right. (Chuckles) All right. Before we get into the medical training, would
8 you mind talking a little bit, I guess just about basic and what it was like for you going
9 through.

10 SS: Okay, well basic for me was a lot easier than it was for a lot of those guys. I
11 mean, one of the things that I did when I was coming up, we lived near James Connally
12 Air Force Base and they didn’t have a Boy Scout group or anything, so I had joined the
13 Civil Air Patrol, CAP (Civil Air Patrol). So I was used to the marching, I knew what the
14 marching steps were. We didn’t necessarily handle a rifle or anything, but we did go up
15 in planes and learned how to navigate a little bit, things like that. So when it came to the
16 marching part and people yelling at you and not laughing then, I had already been
17 through that. That was one of the biggest things people had, was a problem with the drill
18 sergeant getting right up their—they call it, “Getting in your grill” now, but they’d get up
19 in your face and yell. They could actually cuss at you back then; you can’t do that now
20 (Laughs). Making you do pushups and stuff like that. Well, a lot of people had trouble
21 with that and polishing their shoes and stuff like that. The cleanliness and the discipline
22 that goes into being a soldier was a little unique to a lot of them, but I was already kind of
23 disciplined. I had been on the football team and baseball teams, and so I was in good
24 physical shape. We tested, and tested, and tested every week. They would have a group;
25 they would call it kind of like the seven-fifty club. If you scored over seven-fifty, then
26 you didn’t have to go out and do the PT (Physical Training), physical training, in the
27 morning. I just missed that; I was just under that. It was seven-thirty or seven-forty, or
28 somewhere in there. One of the guys in my squad was actually Walter Payton’s cousin,
29 Jack Payton out of Fort Worth, and he aced it without any problem. He was the only one
30 out there to outrun me, but we had a good time. Jack got to stay back, and he would help
31 clean up the barracks and stuff while we were out doing the training. So it was a lot of

1 physical training, a lot of testing, learning about—you know, we'd go out and run in the
2 morning and do out PT, and then we'd go stand in line, stand in line, and go to breakfast
3 and come back. Then, they'd inspect the barracks before we went off to the classes and
4 teaching you about the Army and the ranks and what have you. It made for a full day. I
5 remember the shots very well. They'd make you sick sometimes. A lot of shots, a lot of
6 marching, a lot of physical activity cause if they caught you walking then you had to give
7 them pushups. You can drop down and I give you a hundred pushups at that time, no
8 problem. But not today. (Laughs)

9 JS: Sure, all right. Could you tell me, I guess a little bit about the drill instructors?
10 Were they Vietnam vets? Or do you know?

11 SS: Let's see. I remember two of them. One of them is called Farrell and the other
12 one was named Brady.

13 JS: Okay.

14 SS: I think one of them was a Vietnam vet, might've been over for a while. But
15 some of them just went from the Advanced Individual Training at infantry, which was
16 mostly what they were trying to train us for and had just went into drill instructor school.
17 I can't remember, I think Farrell had actually been to Vietnam, that's all. I couldn't say it
18 for certainty though.

19 JS: All right.

20 SS: Those were the main two. I remember there were two more, but I couldn't tell
21 you much about them.

22 JS: Okay. All right, then. Overall, would you say that basic was sufficient as far
23 as, I guess preparing you for entry into the military?

24 SS: Yeah, yeah it was. Like I said, the main thing they were training us for were
25 infantry and so we spent a lot of time marching and a lot of time at the rifle range. They
26 had a mockup Vietnam village we went through with Daisy Air Rifles, of all things. That
27 was the first thing they gave us. The M14, which is pretty heavy, this was the weapon of
28 choice at that point in time. They changed it to 16 when I was up at West Point.

29 JS: Okay.

30 SS: We learned how to clean that thing religiously and make sure it was in good
31 operation. They took us out to McGregor Rifle Range, and then they taught us about what

1 they were zappers, which were the ones that infiltrated the lines over there. Had to look
2 for that. We learned about camouflage, basic hygiene. Of course, we got to eat those
3 wonderful C-rations, that was before the MRPs were around, or Meals Ready-to-Eat were
4 around. Although, we were one of the first groups to actually test those out before they—
5 they did that on the last weekend or so that I was there out at the rifle range.

6 JS: Okay.

7 SS: The forced marches across the desert would've prepared me better for Iraq
8 than Vietnam.

9 JS: (Laughs) Right.

10 SS: (Chuckles) But yeah. I mean, we learned how to shoot, we learned how to
11 obey orders, and not put somebody else at danger. Now, what they did at AIT (Advanced
12 Infantry Training), I don't know for the infantry guys. I just know what we did for
13 medics.

14 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right. Well, before moving on to your advanced training, is
15 there any particularly memorable moments, or funny moments, anything like that from
16 basic that stick out that you could possibly mention?

17 SS: (Laughs) I'll tell you one. I was with mostly a bunch of guys from National
18 Guard from New Jersey and New York.

19 JS: Okay.

20 SS: One of them's name was Michael Schlossberg. Now, I don't think it's the
21 same Michael Schlossberg that ended up marrying Caroline Kennedy. I think it's a
22 different one.

23 JS: Okay.

24 SS: But his name—he hated the low-crawl pit and so we got pictures of him at the
25 low-crawl pit. Only other memorable event was a couple of them were actually from
26 Juarez and had family in Juarez, they lived in El Paso. We went over the border, we're
27 not supposed to, for a Christmas dinner type thing. They let us off at Christmas. We came
28 back and I remember watching the Super Bowl III at the YMCA (Young Men's Christian
29 Association) downtown. That was a break, a weekend break right before they tested—it
30 was kind of unique in that it was broken up, the basic training was broken up. We
31 finished up—they gave us a week there for Christmas vacation and then we came back.

1 So it was kind of different in that. So when I was waiting to go catch the bus and go back
2 to Waco, we had gone over to Juarez for a couple hours and then came back. Then I
3 caught the bus to Waco and then when I got back, that's when I watched the Super Bowl
4 and then went back to work. But it was kind of broken up, so it was kind of neat having
5 that little break right in the middle of basic training.

6 JS: Right, right. Yes, sir. Okay, all right. Well, once you finished up there and—
7 where did you say you went to the medical training? Was that at Fort Sam?

8 SS: Yeah. Fort Sam was the only place that had medical training.

9 JS: Okay.

10 SS: So that was kind of different. Like I said, I was supposed to go to the
11 leadership training, but I didn't. I went to truck-driver school. Had a week at training and
12 putting people out for guard duty, and then they finally assigned us a class. And it was
13 kind of different because that's where the WACs (Women's Army Corps) went. It was
14 the only place that they were training the WACs at that time. A lot of nurses, I guess, or
15 WAC personnel were assigned to go into the hospitals or wherever. So you got to see a
16 woman for the first in I don't know how long. (Chuckles) That was pretty neat. Plus, it
17 was only a couple of hours ride up to Waco, so that made some of the weekends pretty
18 nice. I could go home and visit. Was assigned to company A-1. Can't remember the
19 captain's name, he was a good guy. I remember that was kind of funny, they wanted to
20 start a band up and march to a drum and bugles and stuff, and they did that, we had a lot
21 of talented people. We had a guy from Hawaii that played the drums, and some other
22 guys from Alabama and what have you. So we had a pretty good group there.

23 JS: All right. Would you mind talking a little bit about the actual training itself
24 and what types of things you were learning there?

25 SS: Okay. I guess the classes—we went to class a lot. It was still a little bit of
26 marching in the morning, a little PT, but not near like basic training. They learned about
27 different types of wounds that you would see. Bandaging techniques, how to carry people
28 on litters. Yeah, we spent a whole night out at Fort Bullis doing that and that was a trip.
29 Carrying people up and down a hill and keeping their head in the direction of travel and
30 making sure they were level. Let's see. We learned how to start IVs, take temperatures,
31 take blood pressure, a little bit about some of the science that you would get for like

1 poison ivy and stuff because you're out in the field, you're going to run across that. They
2 taught us a lot about sanitation, because the medics were in charge of locating a place for
3 the latrine and setting it up and making sure it wouldn't contaminate any water and things
4 like that. Let's see. Head injuries, we went over those and the disorientation and what
5 might be the cause. Then we practiced giving shots on each other. The subcutaneous
6 shots just under the skin, the intermuscular and then starting IVs. Goodness, there was a
7 lot to learn. (Laughs) But yeah, we did that. How to give a physical exam, because a lot
8 of these guys were going to be going to the induction centers and we had to learn how to
9 give them a complete physical exam, an eye exam, hearing tests. They really did that
10 later, but they talked about it. Showed us some machines and so we didn't actually do it.

11 JS: Right.

12 SS: They talked about surgical processes, but again, it was pretty basic stuff there.
13 We didn't practice getting sterile and maintaining a sterile atmosphere. If you got
14 selected into a certain group after that, then that would've been taught. They talked a lot
15 about just contagious diseases and how they spread, about the yellow fever and the
16 mosquitos and malaria, things like that. It was pretty interesting.

17 JS: Okay, all right. Did you feel that it, I guess adequately prepared you for the
18 type of work you would be doing?

19 SS: Well, unfortunately, let's put it—it was called Basic Combat Medical
20 Training and that's what it was. You learned how to be a field medic and do the first
21 initial phases of taking care of a patient and getting them ready to go to the hospital or
22 medevac dust off. You didn't learn about the care after the hospital or any of that.

23 JS: Okay.

24 SS: So for the part that it trains you for, yeah, it was pretty good. Pretty good.

25 JS: All right.

26 SS: I don't think anything can prepare you mentally. There's not a damn thing
27 they can do to train you for mental. You either got it or you don't.

28 JS: Yes, sir.

29 SS: They showed us some operations and stuff like that, so I guess they might've
30 weaned out a few of us weak stomachs. But you had to really be dedicated to making
31 somebody better and look past that. It was pretty good training in that. Now, we did do

1 that night exercise out at Camp Bullis and like I said, that was where they'd do some
2 simulated firing and things like that. You had to pick up injured patients and transport
3 them back to the Jeep or the ambulance. They weren't going to run out there with a
4 helicopter at that time of night. But we took them to the ambulances. Filling out the cards
5 and how to identify what injuries were and how to place them on the body, and things
6 like that. So yeah, for the basic corpsman training, they did a pretty good job. Pretty good
7 job.

8 JS: Okay. All right. Let's see. Well, as you were going through this training, did
9 you have any idea that you would eventually be going to Vietnam? Was it expected that
10 most of the guys going through would be going?

11 SS: Yeah, yeah. That was pretty much what we were all prepared for. We were
12 shocked when we weren't selected. It was just the opposite, we anticipated going. Medics
13 don't last very long.

14 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right. Well, before moving on from this training, again,
15 any particularly memorable moments? Anything like that from this training here?

16 SS: Not necessarily from training, some of the guys I still remember a lot about.
17 Roy Step, he was from Alabama, and Larry King from Beaumont. I was going
18 downtown, they were old enough to drink, I wasn't (Laughs). Them getting drunk and me
19 bringing them back and getting a little of their whiskey. Then, going to the USO (United
20 Service Organizations) club that they had on site, or NCO (Non-commissioned
21 Officer)—not NCO, the enlisted men club they had on site. But I just enjoyed San
22 Antonio, so when we got downtown and got to go around. It was a nice city, it still is, and
23 so I've got some good, fond memories of the times we had together there. Anything in
24 particular funny or anything that happened in training, not really. It was pretty much laid
25 out there and we did it.

26 JS: Right, okay. All right, then. Once you received your first actual assignment,
27 and it wasn't to Vietnam, what was your reaction?

28 SS: Relief (Laughs).

29 JS: (Laughs) Sure, right.

30 SS: Yeah. Then, when they said I was going to West Point, I said, "Well, damn.
31 Am I going to be going to school there or just medic?" Because like I said, I graduated

1 top of the class in both of these and had done real well. I actually got offered, while I was
2 at West Point, to go.

3 JS: Oh wow.

4 SS: But it wasn't—the time I went up there—let's see, I got out in May. So it was
5 the end of May, we had plenty of time. But we got up there and got assigned to the eye,
6 ear, nose and throat, and started learning how to do the procedures on that. But yeah, they
7 had offered and told me I would have to go one year to VMI (Virginia Military Institute).
8 But I had to make my decision right then. It was in June, and they told me an eight-year
9 commitment. I said, "Eight? I don't know about that." (Chuckles) After basic training and
10 AIT, I didn't really want to look at eight years in the Army if that's what it was going to
11 be like." And I kind of said, "Well, I'll have to think about that." And I said, "If you're
12 asking for my decision today—" Which they were, I said, "It'd have to be no because
13 you're not offering anything in the Medical Corps." I asked and they offered training in
14 infantry, artillery, and armored. I said, "Well, I don't see a future in those." He said,
15 "Unless you're going to stay in the Army, I don't see a future in those." I had to say no,
16 and I declined.

17 JS: Right.

18 SS: That was also the time when they bring in the new class of cadets, and they go
19 through a lot more than hell week there. So we got geared up to do physicals on those. I
20 learned a lot from a guy named Tom Weaver. He was in charge of the eye, ear, nose and
21 throat clinic at that time and basically, he was the one that trained me. It was a really
22 good atmosphere. Colonel Manson, Dick Manson, was really friendly. He was the
23 ophthalmologist and we had two optometrists, Doctor Dick Meyers, a major, and Captain
24 Brant. I had a great secretary up there, Millan Pequin, and got to go over to her house and
25 meet her family. A lot of great people that I met at West Point, good people.

26 JS: Right.

27 SS: So yeah, that's where I started doing the training. I might be getting off-base,
28 what was the specific question again?

29 JS: No, just about what it was like there, and I guess your duties there.

30 SS: Yeah, yeah. West Point is really a pretty campus. It's there and a little bit
31 north, fifty-four miles north of New York City. You wouldn't think of it as all the hills

1 and mountains that are there. But there are, there's Breakneck Ridge and another
2 mountain, I forgot the name of it right now, but I used to climb those. I loved climbing
3 and that's one of the things that I used to do when I was young, was climb mountains or
4 cliffs. So I did that. Of course, you're right on the Hudson and you get to see the parade
5 grounds and they had a historical type museum there at the fair. The hospital was kind of
6 old and antiquated, and they have a new one now, thank God. But it was a good place to
7 be. We were right outside the gate going towards New York City, there was a girl school
8 called Lady Cliff College, it was a Catholic school. There were quite a few young ladies
9 there, they finally let a guy in on my second time there. But they had just integrated or
10 quit doing just one gender. There was a place called Round Pond and we used to go out
11 there, kind of on a picnic thing and that was kind of unheard of for the enlisted men and
12 the officers to get together, but we did. We'd go out there and had a swimming dock and
13 things like that. A couple of the guys from my training class at Fort Sam Houston
14 actually came up there with me and we all got different assignments. I think there were
15 about ten of us that got sent to West Point. A guy named Bruce Stevens, who looks like
16 Bruce Willis, he really does I mean they're almost twins, was in the operating room. So
17 he was one of the guys I used to run around with a lot. A couple of guys from Ohio, but
18 then like I said, Tom, the guy that trained me, he and I got to be good friends. Went to my
19 first baseball game there in '69. Watched the Mets and Tom Seaver pitched, and Nolan
20 Ryan was a reliever. (Laughs) You would never think it, but yeah, he was married to a
21 girl that was—her cousin was a broadcast announcer, and he gave us free tickets. So we
22 got to see the Mets, that was in August—I believe it was, playing the Braves. He was an
23 announcer for the Braves, and so he got us the tickets against the Braves, and we got to
24 go into the broadcast trailer. Not the booth at the field at Shea Stadium, but a trailer and
25 that was pretty interesting. Remember that well. It was a very good facility, a very rigid
26 facility, but I didn't have any problem with that. We had inspections like every week of
27 the clinic, and always get up there at the top. Then they quit giving me the award because
28 they said, "You get it too much." (Laughs) They started doing this, "Oh the clinics don't
29 get any foot traffic, we're not going to let them." I worked at the eye, ear, nose and throat
30 clinic for eight hours a day and then I would work on the weekends in the emergency
31 room. There were some days that I would go down, if there wasn't much going on in the

1 eye, ear, nose and throat clinic, and work in the emergency room. So I did put in a lot of
2 hours from the emergency room there. For the first time around, it was pretty interesting,
3 As a matter of fact, that same year was Woodstock. A guy named Frank Ditto from San
4 Diego—San Jose, I’m sorry, had purchased tickets and we were all kind of excited about
5 that, wanting to go see—“Okay, tell us how it is.” Cause the traffic is horrendous and I
6 was working the emergency room that weekend. Wasn’t going to get to go. Lo and
7 behold they called out the emergency room crew and I was one of the ones that went out
8 there. We got rid of our insignias and we didn’t have to wear the cap, and then we had
9 two ambulances. One was the old box-type Army that you’re used to and then the other
10 was a Cadillac, this was West Point after all. So we took the Cadillac out. I always
11 remember the muddy fields and the music and just a lot of tripped out individuals out
12 there (Laughs). That was different, that was one of the breaks. I worked one night, and I
13 remember picking up a thirty-eight year old woman that had just deceased and bringing
14 her back and doing CPR on her all the way back from her house in Highland Park—
15 Highland Village, excuse me. When I got her back, they pronounced her dead. She was
16 dead when I got there. But I can’t pronounce it, couldn’t do it, pronounce dead. Doctor
17 did and that was the first autopsy I got to see performed. That was an eye opener.

18 JS: Sure.

19 SS: Not like in *NCIS* on TV or whatever. (Laughs)

20 JS: (Laughs) Right.

21 SS: They get pretty realistic now, some of them. But that first time, you just— it
22 was kind of different. Preparing her for the morgue and taking her down to the morgue,
23 visiting the next day, being in there on the autopsy with them.

24 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right. Well, the patients that you guys would see there,
25 would they generally be West Point cadets? Or do you also have retired military civilians
26 at all? Or—

27 SS: Yeah, and it was pretty much a mix of those.

28 JS: Okay.

29 SS: We had a lot of cadets. Of course, like I say, we had to do the complete
30 incoming class physicals. All the cadets, and then they would be there in the morning
31 with colds, coughs, what have you. Of course, all the personnel and professors that are

1 teaching, the staff of the hospital and nurses and the doctors. The Engineering Corps was
2 there and then all that support staff. So we get to see them, then we got to see a lot of
3 retired military that was there. What did we go down for? We had a couple of retired
4 generals and colonels and stuff, and I got to be good friends with them. Actually, ran into
5 one of them in Vietnam later. Not a retired colonel, but a colonel. A clock on my patient.
6 So yeah, there was a lot of higher-ranking officials and stuff that you would see around
7 that area, but there was quite a few retired folks in that area. They would come over from
8 Connecticut and a little north from New York, and all over in that area to get treatment.

9 JS: Right. Okay, all right. Well, I know a few moments ago you were talking
10 about Woodstock. When you guys were over there and working at that, did you guys
11 receive any, I guess negative reaction to you guys being there? Considering the fact that
12 you're military. Also, if you could talk about, did you guys see any anti-war protest,
13 anything like that during your time up there in that area?

14 SS: Okay, the first one. At Woodstock, no. We wore our whites, and we didn't
15 have our insignias on, so there wasn't anybody—they were there to have a good time.
16 They didn't really give us too much of a hassle. You got some kind of strange looks
17 because we're out there in these white uniforms and stuff.

18 JS: Right.

19 SS: But that was it. Nobody said anything or spit on you, nothing like that—or
20 give you a hard time. The haircuts kind of were a dead giveaway (Laughs).

21 JS: Right. (Laughs)

22 SS: But they didn't really give us a lot of flak there. Now, conversely, when I
23 went down to Washington D.C. my cousin was stationed at Andrews Air Force Base and
24 so I went down to Washington and did a tour around there. There were a couple of
25 protestors there, but the second time, after I'd been to 'Nam and came back, it was worse.
26 Like I told you before, I felt like Forrest Gump on some of those, you know that scene
27 where he runs across the reflection pool to Jenny, I was actually there one of the days
28 they had that huge protest out there.

29 JS: Right.

30 SS: And I'm in my uniform and I got cussed at, and spit at, and you know calling
31 names and I told them, "You're welcome." That's all you had to do.

1 JS: Right.

2 SS: You can't get into that and any way around it. I told them, "You're welcome."
3 Most of the guys that went to Vietnam didn't want to be there to begin with. I mean, it
4 was—you know, it was just what you had to do. It was your assignment, and there was
5 very mixed feelings on what our duties were there, why we were there, never was really
6 explained fully and I don't think it has been today. Why we were there, you know, the
7 Domino Theory. We ended up leaving out of there and Vietnam fell but it didn't really
8 rush the entire thing going over in Cambodia and spilling over like there was some
9 thinking. And then the other thought was it was to prevent Russia from getting a warm-
10 water port. Then, the other reason when I was over there, is that Vietnam is natural
11 resource rich. It has got so many resources that still today if we went over there as a
12 mining group or whatever—it's like China is controlling all the rare metals right now,
13 there's just as many in Vietnam. If they develop that to where they wanted to exploit
14 those resources, they could, and they could probably do quite a bit of, as far as
15 economically advancing their civilization there. But you know, that wasn't really a point
16 then, the point was we didn't know. If you don't know, you're kind of reluctant to want
17 to do anything. It was piss-poor explained and it never was explained to anybody's
18 satisfaction.

19 JS: Right.

20 SS: The growing sentiment against it really came from the media. There was a lot
21 of people killed. I mean, you're talking about fifty thousand plus in the Vietnam
22 Memorial. Like I said, it really started after the Tet Offensive of '68. In January of '68, it
23 started getting the negative publicity. Up till then, it really wasn't all that bad. So the first,
24 like I said, the first time there in West Point it wasn't quite as bad as the second time
25 there. So yeah, there were a lot of folks that were glad to see that you wore the uniform
26 early on, but it kept growing on '68, '69, it started getting worse. That was when it started
27 getting a lot more protests.

28 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right. Well, prior to your actually going to Vietnam, had
29 you developed much of an opinion on the war yourself?

30 SS: You know, I really didn't understand it all that well, why we were there. I
31 said, "You know, it doesn't make sense to me. But if I got to go, I'll go." I wasn't against

1 it, I wasn't necessarily for it. I just didn't understand it well enough to have a good
2 opinion. I know that we were—like I said the Berlin Airlift and the Bay of Pigs that
3 happened, and we were against Russia and Russia and China were poised to push over
4 and take over this country. They were afraid that it would—not only if it fell, would it be
5 the Cambodia and the Philippines were the big one, and SEATO (Southeast Asia Treaty
6 Organization) agreement. We'd learned about SEATO in high school.

7 JS: Right.

8 SS: We had an obligation to be there, and so from that perspective I wasn't
9 against it, but in—Congress kind of messed up. I mean, they wouldn't let us fight a war.
10 Once we were there, you had so many restrictions and things placed on you that it didn't
11 make sense. I never have believed in fighting to a draw. You either fight to win or you
12 don't fight.

13 JS: Right.

14 SS: It was fighting for draws, kind of like Korea and that's why we're still in
15 Korea today.

16 JS: Yes, sir.

17 SS: You don't fight to a draw; you fight to win.

18 JS: Right. All right.

19 SS: It's like football, I mean you don't play Texas to win. You don't play A&M
20 to win, you want to win (Laughs).

21 JS: Right. (Laughs)

22 SS: A tie is what? Like kissing your sister. (Laughs) So you don't do that.

23 JS: Right, yeah. (Laughs) You know, I thought that same point when you were
24 saying that. (Laughs) Right, right. Well, I know you were talking a little bit about the
25 anti-war movement a few moments ago, and you mentioned that not too much experience
26 prior to, but after coming back you saw a lot more of it.

27 SS: Yeah.

28 JS: What did you think of the anti-war movement? I guess if you could talk about
29 before you went to Vietnam, and not to get too far ahead, but afterwards and when you
30 experience it more closely, did your views of the anti-war movement change over time?

1 SS: I understood the anti-war movement, I understood why people were
2 protesting. They didn't want to go; they didn't want to put themselves and life in harm's
3 way without understanding it. So I understood it from that perspective. I don't and I still
4 do not understand why they were against the American soldiers.

5 JS: Yes, sir.

6 SS: I understand protests in front of Congress and getting their attention and
7 making them review their policies. So I don't have a whole lot against the anti-war
8 protesters, with a few exceptions. Some of the things that happened while I was over
9 there was the massacre at Kent State, and that pissed everybody off in 'Nam. All the
10 soldiers and stuff, especially the guys that were drafted and didn't want to be there to
11 begin with. Really, that was kind of the straw that broke the camel's back. That and Jane
12 Fonda's going over there, that was definitely wrong. But it really irritated folks when the
13 people at Kent State got killed. We almost had a shutdown at the hospital from people in
14 a bad mood, not wanting to work and stuff like that. There were some pretty intense
15 times, I guess you want to call it, when morale got pretty bad because of things that were
16 happening here in the States. Because of protests, and because of the reaction to the
17 protests even more than the protests. I understand the protests, we all understood the
18 protests. They're supposed to be peaceful demonstrations, we have that right under the
19 Constitution. But when it leads to violence and people get hurt—in this instance people
20 got killed, that was wrong. That really threw us in a bad mood over there. There was—
21 like I said, those were kind of some turning points, key points in not only the morale of
22 the soldiers but I think in the morale of the nation as a whole. Kent State and of course
23 when we found out about Jane Fonda's visit and stuff, wasn't nobody real happy about
24 that.

25 JS: Right, sure.

26 SS: That was a pretty bad time. Let's just leave it at that.

27 JS: Yes, sir. Okay, all right. Well, I guess getting back to the timeline here, how
28 long were you there at West Point before you received the orders to Vietnam? Or was it
29 while you were there when you received those orders?

1 SS: Yeah, it was while I was at West Point. Like I said, I went up there in May,
2 the end of May, so June, July, August, September. My birthday was in October, and I
3 guess it was the middle of October that I got my orders to go to Vietnam.

4 JS: Right.

5 SS: You always look back and say, “Well, is that because I didn’t decide to go to
6 West Point?”

7 JS: Right.

8 SS: “Was that punitive there or what?” But I got them in the middle of October.
9 Had a month of vacation coming, so I took that at the end of October and up through
10 almost Thanksgiving Day. So I think I went, I was on the flight Wednesday, the day
11 before—might’ve been Tuesday, the day before Thanksgiving, to go out to Oakland for
12 the flight over. So I got them around the middle of October. One interesting thing was
13 after the vacation and coming back to Texas on the 22nd—it might’ve been 23rd, the day
14 before Thanksgiving, I ran into Bob Hope at the Love Field as I was leaving. He was
15 talking, and my grandmother says, “Who is that loud man?” I finally looked around and I
16 said, “That’s Bob Hope.” (Laughs).

17 JS: (Laughs) Right.

18 SS: He had a couple of aids with him and a couple of reporters, and I turned
19 around and I told him, I said, “Mr. Hope, I hope to see you Christmas in Vietnam.” And
20 one of his aids took down my name and I got an invitation, but the commander of the
21 hospital, who was actually one of the doctors I worked for, wouldn’t let me go. But that
22 was a different one, that was a couple of weeks later. But that was a pretty exciting time,
23 and then I went from there to Oakland. I guess it was—they’re waiting for a plane to go
24 over and just kind of getting everybody’s orders together. We had a Thanksgiving
25 dinner—it wasn’t Thanksgiving, but we had a Thanksgiving dinner before we boarded
26 the plane because Thanksgiving was somewhere over the Pacific, so when we changed
27 the International Date Line, we didn’t get one. (Laughs)

28 JS: (Laughs) Right. Well, before getting into your time there in Vietnam, could
29 you talk a little bit, I guess about your reaction to finally receiving those orders to
30 Vietnam, and what did your family think about it as well?

1 SS: Actually, you know, we all knew that we were going to go. I kind of prepared
2 myself back in May when I was at Fort Sam. I was kind of surprised that we didn't get to
3 spend a full year at West Point.

4 JS: Right.

5 SS: But it was kind of non-issue. I was kind of disappointed because I was
6 enjoying the stay and I was learning my trade there and making some good contacts,
7 good friends. So it was kind of a shock to be going over before the end of the year. But
8 then, you know, '68 and '69 were terrible years as far as the number of people and
9 casualties that were being—that were happening in the battlefield. So it wasn't like it
10 wasn't on everybody's mind. It was.

11 JS: Sure.

12 SS: Now, my parents took it a little harder than I did. My cousin, who had just got
13 back from Pleiku, and he was in the tunnel rat, digging out mines and stuff out of the
14 tunnel, so I told him, "You got a lot more guts than I did." But I came back and like I
15 said, I was in Dallas and Waco. They were concerned that I would make it back alive.
16 One of my friends had gone over, a lance corporal in the Marines, gone over August the
17 1st, I think it was. He died the day he got there.

18 JS: Oh wow.

19 SS: That's who I went to see on the Wall on our recent reunion. Yeah, he got off-
20 loaded on the plane, went to his unit. They did a little sweep and patrol and he sat down
21 on a stump and was blown up. So that was in August and here it was October, so it was
22 pretty fresh on everybody's mind. There was some concern, and I said, "Well, you know
23 I was supposed to go to the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon." And I said, "Well, it's Saigon
24 and there's not a whole lot going on in Saigon. I mean it's not like it's the safest place in
25 the world, but it's not like it's the worst place either." So I wasn't really concerned
26 knowing I was going to go to Saigon at the 3rd Field, which is a pretty good-size hospital,
27 and pretty well protected. So I wasn't really all that concerned. I was a little bit, but you
28 know you don't—you can't let paralysis take a hold of you as far as what's going to
29 happen in the future. It's going to happen or it's not. There's nothing you can do about it.
30 So that's where I was going, and I wasn't as concerned as I think my parents were.

1 JS: Okay, all right. Well, I know you talked about, a moment ago and also the fact
2 that '68, '69 was a really bad time for the war as far as casualties. Had you—as you were
3 going through your time there at West Point, were you following developments? Did you
4 know much about what was going on at that time?

5 SS: Yes. Yeah, we had a lot going on in '69. I mean, we had the landing on the
6 moon. We had Woodstock, that was July and August. But we had had another Tet
7 Offensive back in January of that year, so there was a lot of things going on. You kept—
8 in the Army, you were in, you had to keep up with what's going on because you knew
9 that at any time during your tenure in the Army, you could be given orders to go over. So
10 yeah, we all followed it. But again, there wasn't anything we could do about it. Not as an
11 enlisted person.

12 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right. Well, when and where did you arrive in-country?

13 SS: Well, it would've been the day after Thanksgiving. I arrived and we landed at
14 the airport in Saigon, or right thereabouts. We deplaned and I think the first thing that
15 anybody that lands in Vietnam will tell you, when they open the door to the airplane and
16 you're getting there ready to disembark, the first thing that hits you is the wave of heat
17 and then the smell. If they don't tell you that, they're lying (Laughs). Cause it was hot,
18 even for—when we flew up, we'd gone to Anchorage and then down to Japan and over,
19 and it was actually warmer in Anchorage than it was in Dallas that day by a few degrees.
20 But then when we got in 'Nam, and it was eighty or ninety after being below freezing,
21 nineteen degrees or twenty degrees, whatever it was here in Dallas, that was a big change.

22 JS: Right, sure. (Chuckles)

23 SS: Then, the smell from them burning the crap with the diesel fuel, that just
24 knocks you over.

25 JS: Right. (Chuckles)

26 SS: So we—they got us off the plane and of course everybody had jet-fatigue and
27 so they fed us and let us take a nap and rack us out. Then we went to these clerks, and
28 they took our orders. Well, first thing they did on mine was change from the 3rd Field
29 Hospital to 95th Evac. I said, "Wait a minute, I'm supposed to go to Saigon. Now you're
30 sending me to Da Nang. What the Hell's the deal?" "Well, a sergeant outranks you and
31 we're moving him up." I said, "Well, they put me there for a reason, don't you think you

1 ought to check that?" But they didn't. So Army clerks around the world, if you pissed off
2 a clerk you were in deep trouble.

3 JS: Right. (Chuckles)

4 SS: So the clerk changed my orders and I went that day, later that day up to Da
5 Nang. So we're talking about December 1st maybe, or a little bit before that, 28th or so. I
6 got there, reported for duty, they landed at the airport there in Da Nang and I got on a
7 deuce and a half and drove out to the hospital. Met the company commander, got checked
8 in and they didn't have room for me with the medics, so they put me in with the cooks,
9 which meant I was getting up at four o'clock in the morning, every morning. I was there
10 only a couple of days and then they decided to send me to RVN (Republic of Vietnam)
11 training, Republic of Vietnam training, again. I'd had it while I was at West Point, they
12 sent us to Fort Dix after we got the orders in October. We knew we were going, they sent
13 us for a week of training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and then brought us back. That's where
14 I got my hearing loss—was at Fort Dix. They sent us down to a couple days of training, I
15 think it was at Cam Ranh Bay or Chu Lai, I can't remember. So they had the instructors
16 go through what to look for, for sappers and re-zeroing our weapons and all this other
17 stuff. Just kind of a brief review again, a two or three day review of what we learned and
18 one of the nights that we were down there, we got a rocket attack and I—it woke
19 everybody up, and we're all running outside to jump in the bunkers and grabbing
20 whatever gear we had. That was an experience, that was the first rocket attack I'd gotten
21 while I was down there in that training. I've heard—and I guess they did that pretty
22 regularly cause a couple of our other guys actually got hurt doing that. One of them, that
23 was it, he got sent back. That was a couple of days and then we got back, by that time I'd
24 started settling in with the doctors and stuff that I was going to be working with. I worked
25 in the eye, ear, nose and throat clinic with Doctor Lombardo from New York, he was an
26 ophthalmologist. Doctor James—Colonel James P. Albright was the otolaryngologist, the
27 ear, nose and throat. There was a Chinese guy, his last name Liu, and that's all I
28 remember calling him was Liu. From Houston, he was the optometrist. Clarence Suzuki
29 was there, but only for a couple of days, maybe a couple of weeks before he left, and he
30 was the other ophthalmologist. I would work there for eight hours a day, and then I would

1 work in Receiving, which is where the patients come off the helicopters and it's triage
2 now.

3 JS: Okay.

4 SS: You know, we do the sorting there. Worked mostly with Carolee Day, she
5 was the nurse in charge there. It was mostly the nurses that did the sorting and helping
6 determine which way would go. Now, they did have some doctors that were in there, but
7 medics were assigned to get the vitals. Blood pressure, pulse, respiration, read the tag and
8 find out and look and see how the serious the wounds were, as were the nurses. So the
9 medics worked a lot closer with the nurses than the doctors.

10 JS: Okay.

11 SS: Then, at the very end, the ones that were the most critical after we got through
12 sorting, that's the ones that got to see the doctors in the Receiving. They went right from
13 there to the emergency room or the operating room, depending on what the severity was.
14 So that was pretty hectic time.

15 JS: Yes, sir. All right. Well, before getting more into your actual duties and some
16 of your memories of that, could you talk a little bit about—I guess if you could set the
17 scene a little bit, talk a little bit about the 95th Evac Hospital, kind of what it looked like,
18 the facilities there, and its role in the war if you would.

19 SS: Okay. Well, I had gotten there right after they had built the Quonset huts. So
20 the hospital itself was Quonset huts and they were back-to-back. One Quonset hut on one
21 side, one Quonset hut on the other, and then a hallway between these and there must've
22 been ten of them on each side—ten Quonset huts on each side, connected by a hallway.
23 The eye, ear, nose and throat clinic was on the far south side, and behind our room—our
24 area, was a conference room and across from it was the in-patient clinic, and that's where
25 we took all the soldiers and the civilians. And then, next to that was the pharmacy and the
26 laboratory. Then we started doing patient emergency room and receiving were right there.
27 Then we started doing the operating room and down from that was the actual patient
28 areas, where they kept those.

29 JS: Okay.

30 SS: Coming out of the hospital and you're heading north, it would be on the
31 immediate right side, they had a volleyball court setup. To the left was the chapel by the

1 sea, a little chapel. Directly—then they started the barracks for the enlisted men on the
2 left side, the west. That was where I stayed, the very first one, because that's where the
3 cooks were. Across from that was the mess hall, made it real convenient for them. Then
4 we proceeded on down for about four more barracks or so. And then, across from the
5 enlisted men barracks, then oriented a little bit differently were the offices' quarters,
6 nurses' quarters, and a little officers' club was back behind that. Then they had a trailer
7 there for the commanding officers, so it would be like a real small RV trailer, and that's
8 what he lived in.

9 JS: Okay.

10 SS: Sandy beach, we were right on the beach. So everything that wasn't— they
11 had one sidewalk going down with the little steps going each way, but everything else
12 was sand. Going down then we got to the company commander's quarters and the storage
13 area where they kept all the armory—where they kept all the rifles and things like that
14 was behind that. Then down to the right a little further was the motor pool and the motor
15 pool is where they did the repairs on the Jeeps and the deuce-and-a-half—it's also where
16 they kept the Agent Orange. Then just beyond that was the fence line that started looping
17 back towards the west and to the south, to isolate us from the village around, and then we
18 had guard posts on each of those. That was pretty much it, that was the compound.

19 JS: Okay. All right. I know you talked about some of the people that you were
20 working there with, could you also talk a little bit, I guess about morale at that time
21 period? At that point in the war, upon your arrival, how was morale?

22 SS: When I first got there, morale was pretty good. I mean, nobody wanted to be
23 in Vietnam, but the morale between the doctors, and the nurses, and the corpsman was
24 really good. We worked real pretty tight as a team, and we kept each other up so it was
25 pretty good. There were points in there when it was bad. When I got there everybody had
26 just done their Thanksgiving dinner and that was always a good time, and people are a
27 little bit down because they weren't back home with their family. Then we get a rush of
28 patients, and the workload was high, so you really didn't have to think a bunch about
29 anything other than taking care of the patients and then going back there was a lot of
30 drinking, there was a lot of drinking. (Chuckles) We were trying to relax and trying to get
31 some sleep, but you know you never knew when you were—you were on-call twenty-

1 four hours a day, so you never knew when you were going to have to go back into the
2 hospital.

3 JS: Right.

4 SS: But morale and all, it was pretty good. Then we went into December and a
5 time for Christmas. A lot of first times away for Christmas for a lot of folks. That was
6 tough. I know they had the radio so you could call back home, there with the donut
7 dollies we called them, that's the Red Cross workers. (Chuckles) So that was how we
8 communicated back home. Morale was pretty good through Christmas and New Year's.
9 It wasn't home but we did the best we could.

10 JS: Right, okay. All right. About regarding your duties, you're going there with
11 the eye, ear, nose and throat clinic, what type of work would you be doing there? And
12 what type of ailments, things like that would you generally see?

13 SS: Oh, we got a wide variety of things—I'm going to have to switch ears for a
14 second.

15 JS: Sure.

16 SS: In the eye, ear, nose and throat clinic we'd get people with allergies or
17 shrapnel in the eye, or just eye infections. Some people would go out and break their
18 glasses and they'd have to come in and get issued new ones, so we did a lot of eye exams.
19 Eye infections, there's a lot of eye infections from foreign matter getting in the eye and
20 then getting infected. We did a lot of civilian work, we did a lot of work on civilians,
21 especially the kids and some of the older parents. That was the most part for the eyes,
22 some of it would just be removing foreign bodies or we had to do—even though we're
23 overseas, we had to do a lot of flight inspections, which meant the full eye exam and
24 checking. Then you had patients like the Corcoran, who was one of the guys I saw at
25 West Point. I ran into him over there and of course him coming to get his glaucoma
26 treated and see things like that. I worked there most of the day, and in ears you get a lot
27 of ear drum ruptures from explosions, a lot of bugs crawling in people's ears and lodging
28 in there. A lot of foreign bodies and stuff. But then again, that's a part of the—and one of
29 the reasons I kept going down to Receiving is because when they got a head injury we
30 always had to go down and check out their eyes and ears and make sure they were in
31 good shape. So that was a lot of the duties in the Receiving area, although they extended

1 beyond that. A lot of times, if it was late at night and the doc had gone to bed and I was
2 still up, cause I didn't sleep much, I'd be the first one in when they call out for the eye,
3 ear, nose and throat. We'd set up and make sure they got the X-rays and stuff even before
4 the doc got there. Knowing the routines and what they were going to order for the orbital
5 series or lateral scans of the eyes and things like that. I worked mostly with eyes. Like I
6 said, the nose and throat was pretty much—could've been handled by the general
7 practitioner type doctors. We didn't have a whole lot, except a couple of broke noses here
8 and there when people would get in a fight in a bar or something. (Chuckles) That was
9 pretty much it.

10 JS: Okay.

11 SS: A lot of infections. Because Vietnam was in a tropical climate, the French or
12 whatever used to give out quinine. So there were a lot of instances of people getting kind
13 of a blindness and what have you from the quinine effects after several years. Also,
14 because of the intense sun we get what's called a pterygium, it's a growth over across the
15 cornea of the eye, and we have to cut to do some minor surgeries and stuff in the clinic.
16 That was pretty much a typical day.

17 JS: Okay. All right. I know this is asking you to generalize somewhat, and I
18 imagine it would be quite different depending on what was going on during the day, but
19 how busy, in general, was Receiving? Was it non-stop, or was it quiet at times as well?

20 SS: No, it was quiet at times, and that's when it bugged you a little bit. I mean,
21 you're there to do a job and you start thinking about it. It was very busy, but it rained in
22 spurts. It was very sporadic. We'd work real hard for two or three days in a row, and
23 then there might be two or three days where it was pretty light.

24 JS: Right.

25 SS: We really were glad it was light. Like I said, we did everybody, not just our
26 soldiers. We did the North Vietnamese as well as the ARVN (Army of the Republic of
27 Vietnam) soldiers and then injured civilians. Whoever came in the door we took care of
28 them. It was never—it was a lot more hectic than your typical emergency room. Now
29 they usually use it for regular coughs and colds and stuff, but we didn't do that, these
30 were all trauma injuries that we treated in there.

31 JS: Right.

1 SS: Everybody else went to the clinics, out-patient clinics.

2 JS: Okay, all right. Those that came into Receiving that were wounded, would the
3 goal be to get most of them back out into the field? Or would a lot of them be sent home
4 after you guys had treated them?

5 SS: Well, the goal was always the best treatment possible for the patient. That was
6 the goal, period.

7 JS: Right.

8 SS: It wasn't their final destination, it was secondary. If the injury was mild, then
9 yes, it was to get them back into the field as soon as possible. If the injury required
10 surgery and stay, they were going to be there at least a week. Sometimes we would have
11 to send them to Japan for further treatment there, and sometimes it would be stateside.
12 Japan was a five-hour flight. If they could make a recovery in Japan, then that was great.
13 If they need to go back stateside, then that was fine. Now, one of the things that we did
14 that was a little different is after we patched them up, and we had two psychiatrists
15 working with us, and sometimes they wouldn't let them go just right away.

16 JS: Okay.

17 SS: They wanted to do a little psych evaluation on them first. So that's actually a
18 little later than the first couple of months that I was there, but that was one of the routines
19 that we ran into.

20 JS: All right.

21 SS: Yeah, if they had been there for a week or so and been patched up and were
22 fully recovered, it was pretty typical to have the shrink come in and talk to them before
23 they went back out to the field.

24 JS: Okay, all right. Well, I know you mentioned working on soldiers from—
25 different soldiers, while not just Americans. Could you talk, I guess first of all a little bit
26 about your experience and memories of working with North Vietnamese soldiers and
27 what type of precautions or restraints would there be in regards to them?

28 SS: Okay. Yeah, we worked on all kinds. My first patient was a South
29 Vietnamese soldier, I'm going to talk about him first.

30 JS: Okay, sure.

1 SS: He came in and my job was to take his pulse and respiration and find out what
2 was wrong with him. Well, you couldn't get a pulse. They brought the second half of him
3 in on a second litter, and he asked for a cigarette, and I got a cigarette and he expired
4 right there. So there were quite a few traffic accidents and other type of injuries that we
5 treated, not just the war-wounded, but they were all trauma-type events. That's the only
6 patient I lost the whole time I was there. We had a few snake bites, not very many. The
7 North Vietnamese, when they came in, we had to do a really thorough search on them
8 because some of them have weapons or hand grenades and things like that that were
9 hidden. We had to do a damn thorough search on them. If they weren't sedated or—we
10 used restraints on them, so they couldn't move their arms and legs around. We had good
11 interpreters, and the biggest thing that they had, they were afraid we were going to kill
12 them. We had to make sure that they understood, "We're not here to hurt you, we're here
13 to make you well". That was the first thing, getting the interpreter in there, talking with
14 them, getting them calmed down cause most of them were scared to death and afraid for
15 their life. Getting them calmed down was a big part of it. Now like I said, some of them
16 we had to put in restraints. Then doing the search to make sure that they weren't weapons
17 their self before we sent them back any further in the hospital. Then we could do our job.
18 Once we were safe, then we could do our job, and once they were restrained or
19 understood, then we could do our job. That was the biggest part. Now, after they were
20 taken care of, and if it required a stay, we did have a ward strictly for POWs (Prisoner of
21 War), and I'll be honest with you, some of the guys that were in there were more friendly
22 than the South Vietnamese. They were a lot more jovial, a lot easier to deal with, and a
23 lot of that became because they were walking down the street and all of a sudden, the
24 North Vietnamese Army came by and said, "Hey, you're going with us." They were
25 drafted too, but a little different manner.

26 JS: Right.

27 SS: So they were glad to be there, glad to be safe, and taken care of. They didn't
28 want to be there either. Some of them weren't of course, and we had to keep those
29 restrained and sedated for the most part until they could be taken somewhere else and
30 interrogated and dealt with, taken to a POW camp. But they didn't get any different care
31 than anybody else. We all tried to treat everybody the same. As a matter of fact, I told a

1 general that one day. I told him when he walked in the door he lost his rank, just to calm
2 his ass down. We'll get to him when we're ready, when everything's ready.

3 JS: (Chuckles) Right.

4 SS: I got somebody more severe I'm taking care of right now. (Laughs) He didn't
5 appreciate that, but that's okay. He understood after a while. So yeah, we tried to give
6 everybody the same amount of care that we would anybody else. Of course, if there were
7 two of them lying there and we only had resources for one, then you had to make a
8 decision and we always favored the Americans then.

9 JS: Right.

10 SS: That's pretty rare, that would be extremely rare. We tried our best to take care
11 of everybody.

12 JS: Right, all right. So severity of wounds would trump all as far as—not only
13 rank but affiliation with whichever side as well?

14 SS: Yeah, absolutely.

15 JS: Okay, all right. Was there any—did you see any negative reaction from either
16 the staff or GIs (Government Issue) there that were being treated about the presence of, I
17 guess enemy troops there, the treatment of them, was there any negative reaction to that?

18 SS: Absolutely.

19 JS: Okay.

20 SS: When we first set up the POW ward, the medics were taking guard duty, we
21 were holding guard duty. That's kind of against the Geneva Convention, but that was the
22 way it was. We stood guard duty at night a lot of times—most of the time. Then toward
23 the middle of my stay there, they brought in the infantry units from the field. The infantry
24 guys from the field for the guard duty, but they were there, and they would eat and flirt
25 with nurses and stuff. They got wind of the POWs; they were ready to kill them. I
26 understand that, when they were in the field, they were trying to kill us, and we were
27 trying to kill them. That's always the objective of war at some point. (Laughs) You're
28 there to win, you're not there to draw.

29 JS: Right.

1 SS: Eliminating the enemy is part of that. Yeah, so there was and there were a
2 couple of nurses and things like that that we wouldn't allow on those wards because of
3 their sentiments and stuff. They would be pretty vocal about it.

4 JS: Right.

5 SS: But yeah. You know, I understand that aspect, rightfully so sometimes. I
6 mean, it's understandable to be upset about those guys that might've killed my friend, but
7 I had to put that behind me. My job was to take care of them and if we could, learn
8 something from them to prevent somebody else from getting killed. That's our objective.

9 JS: Right. Yes, sir.

10 SS: And that's hard to maintain that sometimes, but yeah.

11 JS: Right, all right. I know you mentioned a moment ago about in some cases, the
12 North Vietnamese being easier to deal with than with the ARVN. Could you talk a little
13 bit more about that I guess? And I guess about some of their reactions and things like
14 that? What calls you to view it that way, I guess?

15 SS: Well, again in talking about the reaction to some of the POWs there, the
16 ARVN were the ones that if they brought them in, they were the ones that wanted to go in
17 and kill them, right then. The ARVNs were very committed to making their country safe,
18 and rightfully so, that's—you know. They were very territorial and very possessive. Like
19 one time I had to drive the Jeep down to the Navy hospital and if I was getting back late
20 at night, they'd shoot a tracer bullet over your head letting you know you ain't supposed
21 to be out here at night. They were pretty intense people. The ROK (Republic of Korea)
22 Koreans were the same way, they were very intense and pretty emotional about stuff.
23 When you're dealing with patients and injuries, that's the last thing you want, is emotions
24 spilling over. You've got to maintain a neutrality and think logically and not let your
25 emotions get in the way. That's hard, that's real hard. So when we had a POW or
26 something like that and the ARVNs were in there, it was pretty tough keeping them apart.

27 JS: Right.

28 SS: But that's why I'm saying dealing with them. Now some of the guys, they
29 were just friendly guys, I enjoyed having them over. Especially the guys that had been
30 out in the field and hadn't had a place to sleep or anything. If they had time, they could
31 go in and catch a nap in my bunk, I didn't have any problem with that. Told them where

1 it was, helped them get there. Now that's American soldiers, ARVNs alike. That was—
2 they were more intense. They had more skin in the game, if you want to put it that way.
3 But they were pretty intense folks.

4 JS: Okay, all right. How about your impressions of the Vietnamese civilians?
5 What did you think of them?

6 SS: We did a lot of dealing with the civilians, both in-patient wise. They had a
7 little village outside and in the marketplace. We'd stop back at the marketplace coming
8 back from the airport a lot. They were pretty easy folks to get along with, very friendly,
9 very naïve folks. Kind of like people—agricultural society, they were very accepting, but
10 they were very naïve about some things. But very friendly, I got along great with our—
11 of course, everybody had to have a hoochie-momma or whatever you want to call them.

12 JS: Right.

13 SS: They took care of our area, they washed our clothes, they cleaned them up,
14 and we had to hire them, it wasn't optional. It was twenty dollars a month, which was not
15 a lot of money.

16 JS: Right.

17 SS: But we didn't get paid a lot either. They were very outgoing, they were
18 friendly. Brought some food in, we'd share food, eat dinners together, get some of the
19 Navy food. They, of course, wanted us to help them obtain goods and stuff from the PX
20 (Post Exchange) or BX (Base Exchange) and to help bring up their lifestyle cause a lot of
21 them didn't have fans, didn't have anything else. Refrigerators, small ones—refrigerator
22 or anything like that, and lived in little straw huts or in corrugated iron. That was their
23 house and very poor. For the most part they were very friendly, I enjoyed the ones that I
24 knew. A lot of different customs and habits though.

25 JS: Right.

26 SS: Yeah.

27 JS: Okay, all right. Was the 95th Evac, and particularly from your perspective and
28 your part of the organization, was there always enough supplies? Were you guy supplied
29 well or were there times when there were shortages, things that you needed that you
30 didn't get?

31 SS: I guess the biggest shortage we ran out of was blood.

1 JS: Okay.

2 SS: I remember giving two pints in one week which is not (Laughs)— you're not
3 supposed to do that. But yeah, a lot of the corpsman and a lot of the nurses, we all
4 volunteered and gave blood at least once a month. That was the biggest thing, because
5 you might go through fifteen pints of blood on one bad surgery. They kind of tried to
6 limit that, if it was over eighteen or twenty then we were in there too long, we need to
7 clamp it off and do something else. That was the biggest supply we had problems with,
8 we did—we got plenty of the oral medications and I think we had plenty of antibiotics
9 and things like that to give out. Some of their stuff expired and we'd take care of that too.
10 For the most part we had enough supplies, we had enough food with the exception of
11 when the rocket blew up the meat depot. We had to go and eat powdered eggs and stuff
12 like that, and those are not good (Chuckles). But yeah, for the most part we had just about
13 everything that we needed.

14 JS: All right. Well, you mentioned the one rocket attack there. Were—

15 SS: There were several.

16 JS: Okay, that was the question I was asking you, how common were the rocket
17 attacks?

18 SS: Da Nang was known as "Rocket City". Enough said. No, they hit the airport
19 quite a bit. They hit the meat lockers and depot on a regular basis, and down toward
20 China Beach. At our compound—wasn't very long when I was there, I remember getting
21 rocket into the NCO club and blew the NCO club up. Another one landed up by the
22 barber shop. But you know, only two times into the compound, but quite frequently in the
23 area surrounding us and on into some pretty vital areas of Da Nang. So rockets were one
24 of the biggest ones that we had to deal with.

25 JS: Okay, right. All right, let's see. Outside of your duties and working in the eye,
26 ear, nose and throat clinic, as well as Receiving, what other type-things would you do?
27 And also, how would you spend your free time, if you had very much?

28 SS: Okay, well one of the things when I first got there, I was an usher at the
29 chapel by the sea, kind of helped take care of the chaplain. So I did that. I tended bar a
30 little bit at the officers' club. I ran the projector, every Friday night we'd try to have a
31 movie during the non-monsoon season. We'd get a movie in, and we'd look at that. I

1 remember the *Maltese Falcon* and *M*A*S*H* being a couple of them. Company
2 commander didn't like *M*A*S*H*, but that's okay (Laughs). So I'd run a projector, I'd do
3 that. I ran—the second part of my stay there, instead of going into the Receiving all the
4 time, I would take the glasses prescriptions and things like that and go down to the Navy
5 hospital which had been left. They'd moved all the personnel and took almost all the
6 instruments with them. They left the opticians there that were grinding the lenses, so I
7 would go down there and pick up the glasses and bring those back. One of the other
8 things we did, corpsman had to take the bodies from our morgue to the airport. I did that
9 a couple of times with the driver.

10 JS: Right.

11 SS: That's pretty much it, I was on the first team that was supposed to respond if
12 we got attacked. That didn't happen, thank goodness. Never had to deploy on that. We
13 got the rocket, I got out and was ready but that was it. That's pretty much it. I mean, there
14 wasn't a whole lot of free time, we had Sunday off. I do remember actually that rocket
15 attack, I was running to the bunker. One of the Black guys behind me, he said, "Man, I
16 couldn't see a damn thing except your white ass, that's the only way I knew how to get to
17 the bunker." (Laughs) And I said, "Well, that's not good. I'm going to get out of here. If
18 he can see it, they can too." (Laughs) So I'm going to get out here and get some suntan. I
19 remember Sundays mostly was just that, laying out and reading. Getting a tan and trying
20 to act as normal as—like you're at a beach or something, trying to get just some of the
21 stress and tension and let it go. I didn't drink a lot, a lot of them spent a lot of time in the
22 enlisted men's club. I didn't have the taste for beer at that time.

23 JS: Right.

24 SS: Like I said I would serve at the officers' club and every once in a while, I'd
25 get a shot of Jack Daniels and that was about it.

26 JS: Right.

27 SS: It was very infrequent then. Sometimes we'd go down into the village in Da
28 Nang, kind of like a farmers' market where they brought all the food up and stuff. Got
29 some of that. We drove—looked in there, or we'd go to China Beach which was down
30 about five miles south of us. Go down there for a little relaxation. Let's see—that was
31 pretty much it. I got a guitar and I learned to play over there a little bit from a guy named

1 Phil Falcon. So we'd sit outside a lot, late at night after a twelve-hour day and strum on
2 the guitar and just try to relax and let the day go. I had a small TV, so we did get to watch
3 some of the football games.

4 JS: Okay.

5 SS: It was always hot though, it was hot. Except when it was raining and then it
6 was wet and cold.

7 JS: Right. Did you write a lot of letters home as well?

8 SS: Yeah, I tried to write at least once a week to everybody at home. Most of the
9 time I was good about that. I think pretty much all the way through I was pretty diligent
10 about that, at least once a week.

11 JS: Right.

12 SS: Like I said, they did have a radio where you could call home. I didn't do that
13 very often, except on special occasions. Somebody's birthday and I'd call them or let
14 them know how things are going. It was too expensive otherwise.

15 JS: All right. How about, let's see—how about R&R (Rest and Recuperation)?
16 Did you get a chance to go on that?

17 SS: You know you're supposed to get two R&Rs in-country and out of country? I
18 didn't get any.

19 JS: Right.

20 SS: I had set up to go in October of 1970 down to Australia, and instead they
21 came and said, "How about if we cut ten days off of your stay here, and let you go back
22 home?" I said, "Well, that works for me." Cause I had a seven-day out of country and a
23 three-day in-country R&R coming, and I said, "Hell, that works for me." So I came home
24 early instead. I went over on Thanksgiving; I came back on Veterans Day. So easy days
25 for me to remember.

26 JS: Right, right. Well, I know you had received an invitation but were denied to
27 going to Bob Hopes USO show, but did you get to go to any during your time there?

28 SS: No.

29 JS: Right. (Laughs)

30 SS: No, that was pretty slim. They had some Filipinos and the USO would have
31 tours and actually do entertainment at our site. So the Filipinos would come in the

1 officers' club or the enlisted men club and perform. An they did that once or twice a
2 month for a couple of months and then kind of slacked off, and it would be once a month
3 or something.

4 JS: Okay, all right. Well, why don't we go ahead and take a break here today if
5 you don't mind.

6 SS: Oh no, that's great. I'm running out of gas.

7 JS: Okay.

Interview with Sam Sorrels
Session [2] of [2]
Date 10 May 2011

1 Jason Stewart: This is Jason Stewart with the Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech
2 University, continuing an Oral History interview with Mr. Sam Sorrels. Today is—what
3 is today, the 10th?

4 Sam Sorrels: May 10th, yes.

5 JS: Yeah, okay. May 10th, 2011, and this is interview session number two. Okay,
6 last time we left off we were discussing your time in Vietnam, and I guess the next thing
7 now is if you could talk a little bit about the process of coming home, and what that was
8 like for you? The end of your time there and then coming home.

9 SS: Okay. Well, I got my orders and got to come home a week earlier than what I
10 typically would because I missed my R&R. So we went down to Cam Ranh Bay and
11 waited around there for a day and I finally got on a plane. It was a Braniff, big orange
12 thing flying back, and we flew into Osaka, Japan, and then landed in the state of
13 Washington. They hosed us down pretty good, didn't want to bring any contaminants
14 back in. Then from Washington, the state, I got like two or three weeks that I was due for
15 a vacation, so I came back to Texas. Then, from there I was supposed to go to Germany,
16 to Frankfurt, and I stopped by the Pentagon on my way up to New York cause that's
17 where I was leaving from. Tried to get my orders changed and they wouldn't change
18 them, so I went up to New York and went back to West Point to see some friends there
19 before I caught the plane over to Germany.

20 JS: Okay.

21 SS: The hospital commander said they'd been trying to replace me for almost
22 since the time left. So he called up the Pentagon and had my orders changed. So I got to
23 stay at West Point again. So that was pretty interesting.

24 JS: Right.

25 SS: So I was there another nine months and then got my acceptance letter to a
26 community college here in Waco, McLennan Community College. So I got to get out on
27 August the 20th of 1971. Drove back down to Dallas and it was great.

28 JS: Right.

1 SS: Get to see everybody and things like that. Started school right away, and
2 really Waco is kind of a conservative town, I mean it's Baptists University there, Baylor.
3 So there wasn't a whole lot of animosity towards the Vietnam vets like I had seen up in
4 Washington when I would visit there from—Washington D.C. this time, when I would
5 visit there from West Point. Got along pretty well there and did well in school. Was
6 named the first president for the Vietnam Veterans Advisory Committee, so I got to
7 advise some of the other vets coming in and talked to them about planning and how to get
8 their G.I. Bill going and things like that. So it was pretty fun.

9 JS: Right. Well, once you were home, did you continue to, I guess follow the war
10 through the media?

11 SS: Oh, yeah. Yeah, it was—I mean, it was on the news every night, there wasn't
12 a day that didn't go by that you didn't follow it. So the first three years, you know, I was
13 really concentrating on school and it was winding down over there. President Nixon was
14 in office, and I think he had mined Haiphong harbor and really, we had a pretty good
15 advantage over the North Vietnamese at that time if we had capitalized on it. Then of
16 course, the fall of Vietnam came shortly thereafter. I went from MCC (McLennan
17 Community College) to University of Texas, and then up to Baylor after that. I guess the
18 Fall of Saigon came about the time I was at Baylor, when I had just got enrolled at
19 Baylor. So yeah, we continued to follow it. I ended up getting married shortly after
20 entering Baylor, but I continued to follow it. I was glad to see some of the guys—you
21 know, like I said, Waco is a pretty conservative town so we really didn't get a lot of the
22 things thrown at us like happened up in New York or in Washington D.C. It was pretty—
23 most everybody was glad to be home and glad you were home.

24 JS: Well, you mentioned that the Fall of Saigon, what was your reaction to seeing
25 that and seeing how the war came to an end?

26 SS: Man, it was a mad scramble, pretty chaotic. I know we were glad it was over,
27 but exactly what we said would happen happened, and that was if you start withdrawing
28 us it would collapse in a heartbeat, and it did. Very chaotic, a lot of good people that were
29 advisors to us got caught in that mess, and then there was the boat people coming over
30 and I've actually met a few of those folks at some of our reunions. To get their point is
31 very enlightening.

1 JS: Right.

2 SS: But I felt bad for some of our advisors and the people that had gotten left
3 behind because you knew that it was just going to be pure hell on them. A lot of them
4 were killed, and their families, some of them escaped and that was good, but not
5 everybody did.

6 JS: Right. Yes, sir. All right. Well, backing up a moment if we could to another
7 one, you were talking about being president of that advisory board, could you talk a little
8 bit more about that, I guess? Were there a lot of Vietnam veterans going through the
9 college at that point?

10 SS: Yeah. Well, a lot of us had gotten drafted just like I did and got stuck in
11 between getting accepted to college. At that time, once you'd served your commitment
12 you got access to the G.I. Bill and you could put yourself through college, if that's what
13 you wanted. I think a lot of people grew up in the Army or whatever service they served
14 in and it—really there was quite an influx of veterans into the community colleges and
15 the four-year colleges alike to—not everybody wanted to go in that direction, a lot of
16 them took trade schools and what have you, and some of them used what they learned in
17 the Army to make their living. I had started on this, I wanted to get into medical, and
18 that's what I got in, it was in pre-med. Did very well in undergraduate studies, just never
19 could get accepted to med school but that's the way it was.

20 JS: Right, right. Well, if you wouldn't mind, could you talk a little bit about, I
21 guess about life after this point? After college and all that, if you wouldn't mind.

22 SS: Sure, not a problem. I got married in 1975, halfway through college, and we
23 lived there in Waco. I transferred from, like I said, University of Texas to Baylor in '74.
24 Started working out at the General Tire and Rubber Company as a quality control
25 engineer in the chemical-end of it, doing tests on the chemicals that they received.

26 JS: Okay.

27 SS: Was going to school at the same time. So our first two years or so, up through
28 1978 actually, were pretty hectic because I worked and then I went to school. My wife at
29 that time worked at the VA (Veterans Affairs) hospital, which I did a small stint of about
30 six weeks working there while the job at General Tire opened up. The VA was good
31 enough to hire us in. There was a lot of veterans there and some of us were just in

1 temporary positions like I was. Now I was waiting on two jobs, so I'd be there in the lab
2 at the VA or the chemistry lab at General Tire, and General Tire is the one that opened up
3 first. Shortly after that we got the Arab oil embargoes, the first one was in '74 and the
4 second one was in '78. Then in '78, my son was born toward the end of the year. Then
5 we moved up to Dallas and I actually started for the company I'm working for right now
6 in '78—'79 excuse me. To have gone to one other employer but back with this one, and
7 I'll be here— be back with them twenty-five years in February.

8 JS: Oh, wow. Okay.

9 SS: Good, stable company. Good growth potential as far as within their system
10 and pretty stable. Working as an engineer, I took some engineering courses at Baylor
11 after I'd got my bachelor's. So I waited to try to get into med school, didn't happen, so I
12 took some engineering courses. That's where they were leading me at General Tire, they
13 wanted me to get into their engineering department. Then they decided to close up the
14 plant, and I got an offer to go up to Mount Vernon, Illinois, and I passed on that. So that
15 was pretty much it, if you didn't take the offer and go somewhere, then you had to find
16 another job. Cause that plant ended up closing everything except one area, at that time, in
17 '79 and the rest of it closed in '85. But it's like I said, I moved up here to Dallas at that
18 time and worked with FM Global. Doing that field engineering and enjoying the heck out
19 of it. Then my daughter was born up here in '82 and really, pretty good life. We moved to
20 Houston in 1987, and I stayed there until 2003 and moved up here. Ended up getting a
21 divorce in 1992, but still really good friends with my ex-wife and my daughter and son. I
22 see them at least once a month if not once a week. Everything's been pretty good, pretty
23 good.

24 JS: All right. Before wrapping the interview up, I'd like to ask you just some
25 broad questions about some of the larger issues of Vietnam, if you wouldn't mind?

26 SS: Sure, not a problem.

27 JS: Okay, all right. Well, first of all, I guess looking back on your own
28 experiences in Vietnam, how do you feel about your service, and I guess also about
29 American involvement in Vietnam in general?

30 SS: Well, American involvement in Vietnam—yeah, I guess that's about as
31 controversial as you can get. I thought we were doing the right thing, we were trying to

1 prevent Russia from getting their cold-waterfront—excuse me, a warm-water harbor,
2 cause they have cold ones, and it probably prevented more communist expansion down
3 into places like the Philippines and what have you. So from the overall, what did we get
4 accomplished? I think we did a good job. Obviously, we would've liked to have seen it
5 come out a little better. The biggest factor that was holding us back was not the boots on
6 the ground or the advisors within our part, but it's congress, and when they would fund
7 one thing and then turn around and not fund it. We—the direction changed between
8 Johnson and Nixon, and there was a lack of consistency of how we were approaching the
9 war, what we were trying to accomplish there. Like I said earlier, you can't fight to a
10 draw, and it's not proven effective in Korea and it's sure as heck didn't prove affective in
11 Vietnam. So it was—when you try to do that it's a wasted effort, and if you're not going
12 to fight to win you shouldn't get in it. So that's my slant, if you're not going to fight to
13 win don't fight, just lose the fight another day, do something different. Do I think it was
14 worth it? Yeah, I think we should've continued but we should've won.

15 JS: Okay, all right. Let's see, what was your perspective, I guess on the media's
16 coverage of the war and how they reported it?

17 SS: Originally, when it first started off, I think the coverage was pretty fair,
18 showing what we were there for. But then, as the casualties started to mount and like I
19 said previously, during the '68 and '69 Tet Offenses, that's really when the media turned
20 it around and began questioning everything. That's the job of a reporter is to question and
21 get facts. I think they created a controversy; they created a lot of that to get the war over
22 with. I think personalities and celebrities in particular who forced an opposition to the
23 war and stuff had a strong influence on it. I think it turned negative after '68 and '69, and
24 it deteriorated after that. I mean, there was the Chu Lai Massacre and that was brought
25 out and it definitely should've been. We don't condone stuff like that, and it should've
26 never happened. The responsible parties for it—but it just turned real black from there on.
27 I don't think we ever got fair coverage and I think that was one of the reasons behind the
28 lack of support for the troops and the lack of any recognition when we got home. Just to
29 be honest about it. That part was the medias doing. Turned us into thinking we were all
30 animals and stuff versus human beings, and sons and daughters for the people we were
31 fighting for, so that still rubs me a little bit the wrong way.

1 JS: Yes, sir. What's your opinion on US policy towards Vietnam today with trade
2 and tourism, veterans going back to Vietnam? What do you think of all of that?

3 SS: I think that's good. I mean, we did it with Europe, we helped them rebuild.
4 We did it with Japan and we helped them rebuild. United States has always been the one
5 to go back and try to build friendships and relationships out of adversaries, that way you
6 don't have to fight that war again. So I am all for that. Vietnam, we all said when I was
7 there, is a beautiful place if it wasn't in war. It really does, it has some really nice beaches
8 and mountains. The people there are pretty friendly for the most part, so I don't have any
9 problem with that.

10 JS: Do you have any desire yourself to go back?

11 SS: Actually, one of the doctors was going to put together a tour for over there,
12 and yeah, I put myself down for that. I wouldn't mind going back. I travel a lot, so I'm
13 real familiar with the culturals over in the Philippines and Indonesia and that area.

14 JS: Okay.

15 SS: So I would like to see how they've grown and what have you. They're still
16 the communist nation, but we are friends with China, and we go to China. Only place that
17 we don't go is Cuba. I'd like to see those, actually looked at Cuba too.

18 JS: Okay, all right. Last couple of questions here. I know on this reunion we got a
19 chance to see the Vietnam Wall, could you talk a little bit, I guess about your impressions
20 of the Wall, your thoughts of the Wall?

21 SS: Oh, goodness. The first Wall that I saw, they actually brought it to the town,
22 and I could not bring myself to go the first couple of times that they brought the
23 travelling Wall. First time I went was two years ago to the travelling Wall in Branson,
24 and that was because I'd lost a very good friend coming up. Then, plus all the people that
25 were on there, you know some of them have to come through our hospital, and so that's
26 pretty emotional. It was a little easier this time, not that it ever gets easy, but I dealt with
27 my feelings and what have you on the folks that are on there, and said my goodbyes and
28 wished them well, offered up my prayers to them. It's still emotional, and when I go to
29 that Wall, I see the fifty-eight thousand names and stuff up there, but I'm also grateful
30 that that's a tenth of what we sent over there. It could've been worse, and I'm grateful

1 that we were able to do something as a hospital and keep that number smaller than what it
2 is. Keep it from being larger than what it is.

3 JS: Right.

4 SS: I guess that's my feelings on it. It's a very emotional and strong monument,
5 the way it's built down into the ground. It was designed that way on a purpose, I read
6 quite a bit about it when it was being put up and I think the young lady that designed it
7 did a good job. It's just fantastic.

8 JS: All right. Well, is there anything else you'd like to say? Anything else we
9 should cover that we haven't at this point?

10 SS: Not really other than the friendships that you make that develop during your
11 time in the service or some of it lasts forever. You're dependent on the person next to
12 you, and you're trusting them with your life, and that's a pretty strong bond. The reunions
13 and the get-togethers are pretty good reminders and renewing those friendships. I know
14 when I came back, the last thing I wanted to do was think about Vietnam. The thing I
15 wanted to do was get on with my life and put that part behind me, and work to be a good
16 provider for my family, and that's what I tried to do. But it's always with you, and it's
17 just like being born with a birthmark, you're not going to get rid of it. It's there and
18 you're going to have to deal with it one day or another. So it's better to deal with it and
19 rationalize things out and find out what your feelings are, and get in touch with that. I
20 think I've done that, and it's helped. That's pretty much it.

21 JS: Okay, all right. Well, I will go ahead and bring the interview to a close then,
22 but—

23 (Interview audio ends)