The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Keith Erdman
Conducted by Steve Maxner
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Transcribed by Tammi Mikel Lyon

NOTE: 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.

Steve Maxner: This is Steve Maxner conducting an interview with Mr. Keith Erdman on the 26th of February, 2001 at approximately 9:15 Lubbock time. I'm in Lubbock, Texas and Mr. Erdman is in Arizona. Sir, when and where were you born?

Keith Erdman: May 7th, 1948 in Chicago, Illinois.

SM: And did you grow up in the Chicago area?

KE: No, I think it was about November of '48 my family moved to Michigan where my father was from.

SM: How long did you live there?

KE: All my life.

SM: What was it like growing up there?

KE: It was interesting, small town. When I was a real small child I lived on a farm with my grandparents for a couple of years (months) until my dad got a job and we were able to get our own place. As it turned out, the first place we rented, the people that rented it to us, the lady ended up being my boss at a grocery store when I was a teenager so that was pretty interesting.

SM: And you mentioned in the questionnaire that you worked quite a bit as a young person?

KE: Yes, my parents got divorced when I was 13 and I was the oldest one of six kids so I ended up helping to supply money for food on the table, buy my own clothes for

school, et cetera. I worked as a paper boy, I did odd jobs, I worked at the neighbor's. Across the street from our house at that time the neighbors had horses and I helped the neighbor out with his horses. I helped him build an addition on his house. I delivered newspapers and then I worked in a grocery store and a couple of summers I worked in a celery field, mucking the celery plants and doing celery processing.

SM: Was that difficult work?

KE: Oh yeah, that was real difficult work; you're crawling on your hands and knees for 150 feet or 200 feet down this field and then turn around and go back the other way. When you get done with one row, you do another row. That was kind of painstaking work. Part of the process there was cutting the ends off the celery and trimming them in the processing area there. I think the second year I worked there I ended up working inside that part of it.

SM: Okay, did you and your brothers and sisters get along well?

KE: Yeah, I think we got along really well. I was pretty busy working most of the time. Yeah, I got a whole suitcase full of letters I used to get from my youngest brother and my next to youngest brother when I was in Vietnam. Those might be of interest to you.

SM: Yes, sir, they are. What was the breakdown of you as children as far as brothers and sisters, boys and girls?

KE: There were four boys and two girls.

SM: I would imagine that after the divorce all of your siblings tried to kick in and help?

KE: Yeah. Well, my youngest brother was only like a year old when my parents got divorced. That was kind of a hectic part of my life there. I started hanging around with the wrong crowd at school and got in a little bit of trouble; not real serious trouble. Then I kind of straightened out after that.

SM: Was there anything in particular that you enjoyed about school, subjects or sports or something?

KE: Yeah, I liked government of all things, government and cross-country. I ran cross-country for three years I think. I was on the bowling league for a couple of years. I

did have an opportunity to play some sports, but my work after school and stuff kind of dictated what I was allowed to do.

SM: Well go ahead and talk about how you came to volunteer to go into the service?

KE: That's another story in itself. Well, I think it was in June the Air Force approached me because I was pretty mechanically inclined. I scored pretty high on the test. I was all signed up on a 120 day delay program to go in the Air Force as an engine mechanic. After basic I was going to be trained and work on jet engines and stuff like that. At that time I was living with a buddy of mine and he was all gung-ho about going into the Marine Corps and they had the buddy plan and all that stuff, and one night we stayed up all night watching war movies of all things and drinking beer and having a good time, and I think the next day we went down and signed up for the Marine Corps. So, we ended up going in the Marine Corps on the buddy plan. We both went to Parris Island, South Carolina…not Parris Island, excuse me, we both went to Camp Pendleton, I guess San Diego Recruit Depot is what they called it. From there we went to…let's see, there was like four of us that were pretty close, Fred, myself, Brian, and Brian's buddy that he came in on the buddy plan with, and those three guys all went to further training and went to Vietnam within a few months after getting out of all the basic training. After basic training I got sent back to Camp Pendleton, 27th Marines and started doing training and infantry games and war games they called it. And I took classes and I ended up being a weapons instructor and toward the end before I went to Vietnam I was one of the bad guys during the war games. I had like a platoon of guys and we were the bad guys. I was meritoriously promoted from PFC to Lance Corporal and then another meritorious promotion to Corporal before I went overseas. I think I volunteered to go overseas, it would have been November or so of '67. That was after I found out my buddy got shot over there and he got all messed up. At first they said he was killed, and then they found out he was still alive and in a hospital in Japan and he got all the way back to Great Lakes Naval Hospital before anybody even realized that he was still alive. His dad was notified that he was killed in action and all that stuff; it was pretty crazy. Anyway, I ended up going to Vietnamese language school in it would have been February of '68. There was a bunch of us that were in advanced training for Vietnam and during that training they gave

us an aptitude test for foreign language and all the guys that scored relatively high on it got to go to this Vietnamese language school. Myself and Dennis Burke and Paul Covarrubias were the three corporals that were at the school. I was the Head Corporal; I had the most time in grade, so they put me in charge of the school. We went to that crash course for 90 days and at the end of that 90 days I was promoted to sergeant and at that time I was one of the youngest sergeants in the Marine Corps. When I went to Vietnam I was the youngest sergeant in the 3rd Marine Division over in Vietnam.

SM: Let's go ahead and go a little bit deeper into some of your training.

KE: What's that?

SM: Let's go ahead and go a little bit deeper into some of your training, in particular here you go, graduate from high school, get drunk one night, watch some war movies, and end up in the Marine Corps. What were your expectations about boot camp, and did they meet or exceed those expectations?

KE: Well, boot camp we knew was going to be a bugger. We figured it was going to be hell because we'd seen all the movies and they always put a little bit about basic training in a lot of those movies. We had a friend of ours that graduated from high school before…well, he graduated with us, and he went in the Marine Corps in June. So when he got out of boot camp he would send us gum in the mail, knowing that we would be punished for getting this gum in the mail. We spent a lot of time doing push ups! I still owe him for that; I've never collected, but I still owe him for that!

SM: What was the most challenging part of boot camp for you?

KE: The most challenging part was keeping the guys all together. I don't know, I think maybe because I was a young adult, having six or five brothers and sisters below me, and being head of the family so to speak at a young age gave me kind of an aptitude for keeping things under control. I think that was probably the most challenging thing was keeping these guys all together because there was a lot of jabbing and in fighting and stuff like that where guys were giving each other a lot of hassle. But, the DI's, those guys were sharp. They seemed to be like psychiatrist and they knew that the job they had to do was to make it so we'd survive. There was a few guys that didn't make it, the guys that just weren't strong enough and ended up going back, and some I'm sure got mustered out. We had one guy in our company, I think it was his third attempt to make it through

basic training, and I don't recall if he made it through with us or not. I'd have to get out my book that I don't have with me and look in there and see if his name is in there. It was a pretty harrowing experience, a lot of physical and mental work. They're always yelling at you for this and that. There were days when you were wondering if you'd be able to wake up in the morning because you're so sore and stiff. I was a non-smoker but I started smoking just because those were the only guys that got breaks. If you got them, light them up. So, a lot of guys started smoking just because they got a break from doing everything! I remember at night they'd take…we had like a stove in the middle of our Quonset hut and the guys would huddle around underneath this blanket smoking cigarettes at night and then poofing the smoke into the stove and letting it go up the pipe and outside. I can remember being on the top bunk by the window that faced the DI's hut and watching to see if they came out, and if they came out I'd signal the guys that were smoking and they'd quit for a while and not blow any smoke out the stack. I'm sure those DI's sat in there with their binoculars or whatever and just kind of laughed at what was going on out there. I'm sure with the thousands and thousands of people they put through there that they knew everything that went on!

SM: Were there any experiences or anything that stands out in particular from boot camp for you?

KE: Well there's several things that happened. I think it was Camp Peterson was the gunnery range at that time where you shot your rifles for long distances like 1,000 yards, and that's where they checked for people for like Recon and sniper school and stuff like that. I had a rifle that wouldn't shoot. I mean, I was a good shot because I grew up hunting and fishing. I was a really good shot and I couldn't hit the target and they kept coming over and kicking on me and smacking at me and yelling at me and I said, 'Sir, it's the rifle! It's the rifle!' So finally this one guy came over and he was an Olympic shooting champion. He was like a staff sergeant. He came over there and shot my rifle and missed the target and says, 'Yep, the rifle's bad. Send him to the armory and get another one.' So they sent me to the armory and I got another rifle and I came back and apparently while I was gone to the armory one of the recruits that was getting picked on really bad shot one of the instructors. So, that was pretty mortifying that

somebody would do something like that. You wonder what makes people tick. That was not good.

SM: Now you were firing M-14s?

KE: Yeah, right, that would have been the M-14 we were firing.

SM: What happened to the instructor?

KE: I don't remember. I can't remember if he died or if he was just wounded. That all happened while I was gone to the armory and when I came back was when I found out about it.

SM: What happened to the recruit?

KE: He was hauled off. The MPs came and got him. I don't know what happened to him, either. When you're in basic training you're not privy to that type of information.

SM: Yeah, I didn't know if it filtered down.

KE: They keep that. I'm sure the instructors knew what happened but they're not going to say anything. Then we were at hand grenade training one time and one of the instructors was showing us what not to do and accidentally let the spoon fly on what they call a Willie Peter grenade, that was white phosphorous, and the thing exploded right in his hand and he just disintegrated. He virtually disappeared before our eyes. We had to go around and search for body parts and the only thing we found was the palm of one hand, just the skin part, the palm of one hand and a couple other fragments of body. White phosphorous just ate this guy right up. We found pieces of his uniform and stuff like that, but as far as his physical body the biggest thing we found was like part of the palm of one of his hands.

SM: How far away from you, the trainees, the recruits, how far away was he from you when that happened?

KE: Oh, we were probably 50-80 feet away I guess. When it went off it went off right into his body. He pretty much shielded anybody else around there from it. But, it was something else, boy, whoo.

SM: Any recruits drop out after something like that or after the incident where the DI was shot?

KE: Not that I recall. Back when we were in school, you didn't just drop out. If you didn't make it though to their satisfaction, you went to what they called the motivation platoon and received further instruction there. Then when they thought you were ready they put you with another recruit school and start you over again. I guess today they can get out just by saying they quit. It's probably not quite that easy, but it was something similar to that.

SM: Did anybody seem to have trouble dealing with this psychologically? That's some rather traumatic events.

KE: Not that I could tell from my point of view. Everybody was pretty shocked when a guy gets wasted. But, there was a couple of guys that had trouble when we were throwing hand grenades. Kind of goofed up and dropped the pin inside the pit and they didn't get the hand grenade very far apart and there was a big explosion really close by. A lot of our training was live fire training. When you see the advertisement where they crawl underneath the barbed wire and they were shooting, that was live ammunition that they shot. They had what you call ground effects so they had bombs going off in different spots around you so it would be just like a fire fight. So, all the training that you got was I guess so you wouldn't be surprised, so loud noises wouldn't surprise you or sudden movements wouldn't surprise you. You went through all the basic war training during basic training and ITR is what they called infantry training regiment. That was when you did even more stuff. Then you went to…the guys that went right to Vietnam after basic training went to staging battalion and they received jungle training for four weeks and they showed them booby traps and all that stuff. But, I think the guys like myself that stayed in country longer, in the U.S. longer and got to be with an infantry fighting unit and played the war games…I played the war games for almost a year and a half, and during part of that time I was an instructor and part of that time I was a bad guy. So, you learned a lot of stuff because you pulled stuff on the guys. Our goal as bad guys was to go get the general out of his tent at night without the good guys knowing we were there, and we were pretty darn successful. As a matter of fact, it got to the point that the general got mad and said, 'Okay, I'm getting tired of being rousted out of my sleep. I'll put my two stars on the bedpost there and you take those, and if I wake up in the morning and they're gone, then I know my guys failed.' So, the next operation we had, that's

what we had to do. We had to sneak in there and steal his stars and then leave instead of taking him out. It was more difficult taking him out because you had to gag him so he didn't yell. But, it was pretty embarrassing I think; he didn't like that.

SM: I forgot to ask a couple of questions about you going in in terms of your family's perceptions. What did your mom think when you went home and told her, 'Hey mom, I just signed up for the Marine Corps!'

KE: I really don't recall that part that much. I know my brothers and sisters were kind of disappointed, but they understood. My dad was a World War II veteran. I basically told them, 'I'm doing it so hopefully you won't ever have to.' I remember that part, and thank God none of them ever had to.

SM: Now did you have much contact with your dad over the years?

KE: Yeah, oh yeah. As a matter of fact, the older I got, the closer we got.

SM: Did you tell him when you enlisted.

KE: Oh yeah.

SM: What did he think?

KE: He was worried.

SM: Because the Vietnam War was in full swing at this point?

KE: Oh yeah. I graduated high school in'66 and I got in country just in time for the TET Offensive in '68.

SM: What did you think or what did you know about what was happening in Vietnam when you went to enlist?

KE: Well everything you read in the paper, I guess when you got over there you realized it was all a bunch of crap because the newspapers weren't printing what they were told to print, and that really wasn't what was going on over there. The American people didn't have a clue to all the stuff that was going on. For whatever reason, I'm sure the government has their reasons for keeping everything secret and not letting things out, but war is war and you've got to do things that are not good. Nobody likes killing people, but if they're going to kill you you'd rather kill them so they don't get you and you can go on. My grandmother used to send me the local newspaper and we'd laugh when I was over there. We'd laugh at what the newspaper printed what was going on and what was actually going on. I've got some tapes that I sent my dad when I was over there

but I don't know if they're even able to get anything off of them anymore because they're so old.

SM: Tapes are actually a pretty stable medium.

KE: Are they?

SM: Yes, sir.

KE: I've kept them sealed up. They're real small tape, they're those I called them a ten dollar tape recorder back in the old days. They were real small. I think their reels were like two inches. But, I've got several of those that I saved that my dad and I used to talk back and forth on those tapes. I've often thought about taking them to an audio place to see if they can transfer that information onto something good but I've never gotten around to it.

SM: We can talk about this more later but we have that capability if you're interested.

KE: Oh cool, I'd be very interested.

SM: Okay. Now, back to boot camp real quick. You mentioned there's one incident somebody got into an altercation apparently with a DI?

KE: Yes.

SM: Would you talk about that briefly?

KE: Which one?

SM: A guy named Dewberry?

KE: Oh, Newberry, or Dewberry! I can't remember if it was Dewberry or Newberry. We were at the rifle range down at Camp Peterson and he was mouthing off and he said something smart back to the DI, and he was one of our guys that had been to the motivation platoon like two times and then came into our unit, and the DI told him to face the wall, or kiss the wall, 'Kiss the wall!' he said. Newberry just turned around and faced the wall and didn't put his face right up tight against it, and the DI came by and hit him on the back of the head and he was just far enough away from the wall that when he hit him like that it broke his nose and broke a couple of his front teeth. So, he was kind of a bloody mess. Man, I said, 'That Newberry guy, he just don't listen!'

SM: Did he just get fixed up and brought back to your platoon?

KE: Yeah, it seems like he got fixed up and came back, and that's the guy that I don't know if he graduated with us or if he went back to motivation platoon again. When you go to the rifle range you're towards the end of your time in basic training and I just can't recall if he went back to motivation platoon or if because that happened to him they let him graduate and sent him on to get him out of their hair, and hopefully not have any hard feelings.

SM: Was there much occasion in addition to that for there to be physical contact between DIs and recruits?

KE: Not really. There was a lot of like hand to hand combat with the punji…with the pugil sticks, with the padded end on the pugil sticks. They were very adamant about really beating on people with those pugil sticks just so they knew that even though they're cushioned, they'll hurt you. I remember getting knocked a little silly one time. I would do different things so I wouldn't get hit, I'd roll on the ground, because the only thing you had to do was kill the other guy and if you jabbed him in the stomach with your stick, you killed them. So I'd just roll over on the ground and stick my stick up in his belly and that big fat end, that thing had to be eight to ten inches around, and that would be a kill, and therefore I wouldn't get hit! They sent a couple of guys out there after me and said, 'Hit him!' Oh boy, one of them got me, too, holy mackerel! I saw stars! We had helmets on and everything but I think he wound up like a baseball bat and hit me because it just knocked me for a loop; I didn't see it coming.

SM: The DIs that were training you, were most of them Vietnam veterans?

KE: I would say all of them were.

SM: Did they talk a lot about what they experienced in Vietnam in training?

KE: Sometimes, not in the correlation of like a guy speaking to…like me talking to you. They would say, 'That'll kill you over there! That'll kill you over there!' So, they didn't really talk about their experience or what they experienced, they just would refer back to Vietnam when you made a mistake, that that would cost you your life.

SM: Were there any particular lessons that you remember, that they'd say, 'This will save your life,' or, 'This will kill you in Vietnam?'

KE: Not really. A lot of that's hard to remember. You're bringing up a lot of old stuff here that I haven't thought about for a long, long time.

SM: Well was there ever anything that you received in training where they said something like, 'We've got to train you on this because it's part of the training doctrine, but the bottom line is this is irrelevant for Vietnam, or this doesn't matter for Vietnam,' or something?

KE: They did do that. There was a couple of things like in weapons training, because we didn't get M-16s until just before we got out of ITR. We trained with the M-1 and the M-14 and the…I can't even remember the name of it now, it was a big rifle that had a tripod on the end of it. It was a BAR is what it was, something assault rifle, BAR, but it was bigger than the M-14 and it had legs on the end of the barrel. It was a pretty heavy weapon, shot a lot of rounds, but it wasn't a machine gun. They said, 'You guys will probably never see any of these weapons.' Then I went into weapons training. I didn't get weapons training until I think I was in…I think I was with the 27th Marines when I went to weapons training school and then I taught weapons during the time that I was doing the war games and stuff like that. Basic training, I don't think we saw an M-16 until like toward the end of infantry training school when we were up at Camp Pendleton. But, we were out of basic training. The basic training was what we did in San Diego at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, and then you went to infantry training regiment for more advanced training. At that time is when we got the M-16s. I'm trying to remember, I think it was out at basic training that I was selected to go to…they were going to send me to school to be a sea-going Marine. That would be a Marine that was on a ship and he'd be like an MP, a guard, or an aid to the commander of the ship or whatever. I asked permission to refuse that, because all my buddies went to infantry school. They changed my orders from going to that other training and I went back to being in the infantry. During ITR I was in charge of the supplies. Everybody had a duty in infantry training regiment, the extra duty other than keeping care of your hut and stuff like that. They put me in charge of the supply room and I handed out toilet paper, soap, toothbrushes, toothpaste, and stuff like that. After we got out of ITR I was promoted to PFC upon graduating from ITR. There was a few guys in our company that got promoted to PFC right out of boot camp and then a few more of us got promoted to PFC out of infantry training regiment. After infantry training regiment my buddies and I got split up. They

went to Camp Lejune, South Carolina and I went back out to Camp Pendleton and that's where I joined up with the 27th Marines.

SM: Now the first time you received the M-16 and fired it, what did you think of it?

KE: I thought it was pretty cool. It was a pretty simple weapon, lightweight, not near as heavy as that M-14; man that thing weighed a ton, it weighed a ton! They showed us that it would last, it would fire better under the conditions over in Vietnam which were…they got a lot of rain over there and a lot of mud and stuff like that. One of the things they reiterated to us a lot was keeping your weapon cleaned every moment you get a moment, clean your weapon because that's your lifeline, and that was true. I was in a couple of firefights where my weapon misfired and I can only attribute it to the fact that I set my weapon down to help somebody that was wounded, several of us put our weapons down and I didn't get my weapon back. I got somebody else's weapon because I was a fanatic – being a weapons instructor – I was a fanatic about keeping my weapon clean. I never had any trouble up to that point until that day, that dog gone thing jammed. I threw it away and found another one that somebody else that had gotten medevaced out, we always kept their guns in case we had a misfire or one that didn't work so that we'd have an extra weapon for that person.

SM: Now when you say you threw that one down, it wasn't left, you just put it down?

KE: I just put it down and grabbed another one. When we left we took everything with us. When we finally got off that hill, we took all the extra guns and stuff with us.

SM: We're a bit further ahead than I want to be, but I want to ask this question while we're there; would you guys keep track of who had what weapons by serial number, that is while you were in Vietnam?

KE: When I was in Vietnam, I don't believe so. No, I don't believe so because I know a lot of guys after that one big firefight we were in had different weapons than what they came with.

SM: But they did have serial numbers on them?

KE: I think so, but I really don't recall. They were so mass-produced that I'm not sure. It seems like all gun makers put serial numbers on their weapons. That only makes sense to me, but I don't recall that each specific weapon had one.

SM: Now real quick, back to your training. Before you went to Vietnam you mentioned that of course you spent quite a bit of time, basically I guess it was a year, back here in the United States before you went to Vietnam, and during that time period you went to your boot camp and ITR, and you also went through some language training?

KE: Right.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and describe the language training and how effective or ineffective it was.

KE: Well, the Vietnamese training school was at the Presidio Monterrey in California, Northern California. It's located up by Fort Ord. They taught a lot of different languages there; I guess every language that was in the world they taught there and had instructors from most countries there. We had Vietnamese instructors so I guess that would be my first contact with a Vietnamese person was at this Vietnamese language school. They took teachers from Vietnam and brought them over to the U.S. here to teach us. It was eight hours a day with the teacher and then three hours every night with homework. You'd listen to these tapes, and actually we found out, and I'm not sure if our school was one of the guinea pigs for this or if they'd done it before, but if you listen to the tape while you're sleeping at night you retained a lot more of the information. So, it was nice going to the class during the day and speaking and listening and talking and trying to understand. But, then when you went home at night and listened to the videotape and followed your lesson plan or book through, then when you went to sleep at night you put on those headphones and listened to all that stuff all over again. It was pretty intense training from that standpoint, that for 90 days this is all you had. We had weekends where you could do things, but we didn't really have any time after class to go out in the town or anything like that.

SM: Did you find that when you got to Vietnam that this training was useful?

KE: It was beneficial for me because after I'd been in Vietnam for I think seven months, six months, something like that, close to seven, I was requested by the commanding general of the 3rd Marine Division to meet with him and they reassigned me

to a Army MACV unit as an advisor to the Vietnamese police field forces in Quang Tri Province. So, my Vietnam language training helped me in that sort of way, but the only problem was in Quang Tri Province, they spoke a different dialect. We were all trained in the Saigon dialect, which was the area way South in South Vietnam. So, I could understand bits and pieces but the words weren't exactly the same, so I had to have an interpreter because I was the only American there working with these Vietnamese police people.

SM: And is there anything else that you want to talk about with regard to your training or your time with the 27th Marines before going to Vietnam?

KE: I think that time that I spent in California there doing that training helped my survivability when I was over in Vietnam. I think I had a better survival concept, especially when I had the ability to be one of the bad guys and go disrupt the general's sleep. It gave you a different perspective than just being the guy standing around there on guard watching for the bad guy. I think my survivability was enhanced by having all this extra training, more so than the guys that got sent right over, right out of basic training.

SM: So by the time that you received orders that you were going to Vietnam, did you feel like you were as prepared as you could be?

KE: Yes.

SM: When you did find yourself in Vietnam and after spending a certain amount of time there, did you ever think back and say, 'Boy, I wish they would have talked about this or that or the other thing in training,' and focused more on certain things in training?

KE: No, I think I only wished that I probably would have went on a ship!

SM: So what did you think when you received your orders that you were going to Vietnam?

KE: Well I was happy because I volunteered to go to Vietnam because my buddy had been shot and I was going over there to settle a score and had all these rah-rah, gung-ho plans. So that part of it wasn't bothering me.

SM: And at this point you were a sergeant you thought?

KE: Right.

SM: So more than likely you would be either a team leader, or more likely actually a squad leader?

KE: I was a squad leader to start with, and then right guide and platoon leader, depending on who got shot on any specific operation. That kind of determined where you were on the ladder.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and describe your trip over.

KE: The trip over?

SM: Yeah.

KE: Well, let's see, we hopped on an airplane, and where did we go? I think we got on the plane…you know I can't even remember where I got on the plane at? I know we went to Seattle, Washington and then we stopped there and picked up some guys and then we went to Anchorage, Alaska. Then we went to Japan. Then we went to Okinawa. Then, we went to Vietnam from Okinawa.

SM: Do you remember where in Vietnam you arrived?

KE: I arrived in Dong Ha, I think it was Dong Ha. No, that's wrong; Da Nang, Da Nang is where I came in at.

SM: What were your first impressions when you got off that plane?

KE: The first thing I looked around and I said, 'Holy smokes, this is big!' That Da Nang airstrip and the base around there was really huge. It took me a little while to get to where I was going to get my orders and to get sent out in the field. I took some pictures of Da Nang, the air strip there I think when I went on…either when I was going home or when I went to Australia for R&R, so I have a couple of Polaroid shots of the airfield there. I've probably got about 40 or 50 pictures. I was a real camera nut and I carried a Brownie, a little box camera. But, most of my film never came back to me so somebody's got a lot of good footage because we were into shit a lot and I took a lot of pictures. I bet you I took a roll a week and I never got those back, and I kept saving my film and saving my film. We'd send them out on the chopper in the mail when we were out for long operations, sometimes we were gone 45 days at a crack and the chopper would come in and bring us more food or whatever they'd take the mail out and they'd bring us mail in. I never saw any of those pictures that I sent out on the chopper in the

mailbag. They all went to some photo studio in Louisiana. Anyway, where was I before I got lost here?

SM: You were just talking about your first impressions of arriving in country.

KE: Oh yeah, yeah. Well, when I finally got up to Dong Ha, and that was probably a 50-mile trip in the back of a deuce and a quarter…I'm trying to remember if we flew up to Quang Tri. I think we might have flown from…that part is kind of sketchy, too. I don't know if we flew from Da Nang to Quang Tri or if we rode in the back of a truck, I don't recall that part. All I remember is getting to Dong Ha to the base and there was I think three of us that reported to duty, myself and two other guys. I don't remember the two other guys' names. There was incoming and me and one of the guys ran out the back door with the guys that were already in there, the guys that had been in country for a while, and the one guy that turned around and ran back out the front door took a direct hit. So, we never saw him again obviously. They went around and picked up pieces of that guy. I guess that was quite a shock to the system to say, 'Well, that guy's trip's over.' So that was kind of a hairy deal and a real eye opener; here today, gone tomorrow type of thing. Being a sergeant I was higher up in rank than all the guys that were in the office there, but I was kind of a smart guy and I'd listen to what people have to say of lesser rank just because they'd been there longer, and they had the experience where I didn't. So, it worked out pretty good, too, because when I got out to my company which was on the road to Con Thien, they were guarding a bridge, I met the company commander and then I became a squad leader first, so I took over a squad from a corporal that had about three or four months left to do before he went home. I just told him, I said, 'Hey, you've been here for eight months. The squad's still yours. I'll sit back and pay attention and when I feel ready I'll take over.' So for about two or three weeks I played the role of a team leader and he stayed the squad leader and I just paid attention. We'd go on night patrol and stuff like that. After a while I felt comfortable so then I took over the squad, and the rest is history.

SM: When did you arrive in country?

KE: I think it was April 6th of 1968.

SM: And the exact unit that you were assigned to, this was C Company, 1st of the 4th?

KE: Yep, Charlie Company 1-4, 3rd Marine Division.

SM: 3rd Marine Division? What kind of briefing or briefings did you receive when you arrived at the unit?

KE: I don't remember receiving much of a briefing other than the fact that the captain told me that, 'This is where we're at today, we don't know where we'll be tomorrow, and right now we're guarding this bridge over this little river here and it's the only way that they can get supplies to Con Thien,' and some Army base that was up that way. That was our job was to keep that bridge safe, so we would do patrols way out around at night to keep the Vietnamese away so they couldn't get their mortars in close enough to do any damage. That was basically we were there from the 6th of April, yeah. I got in country and I went from Da Nang to Dong Ha to out there all in the same day. So I didn't waste any time. I must have flown from Da Nang to Quang Tri and then taken a truck or a jeep or something from Quang Tri landing field to Dong Ha. [sneezes]

SM: You need to take a break for a second?

KE: No, I'm fine, no.

SM: Your first impressions of the unit, what did you think?

KE: I said, 'Well, this is where I'm going to live for a while?' I'm looking at these guys and they're all living in the ground with dirt all over the place. I said, 'Well,' I says, 'I guess.'

SM: What kind of base camp area was it?

KE: It was kind of rocky and sandy. We had a perimeter set up around this bridge and it was nice because you could take a bath everyday because you had that water right there. I guess the guys basically stayed fairly clean and you could wash your clothes and stuff like that so you'd have clean clothes to wear. It was just I think every four nights you went out on night patrol because there was a company there, let's see, three squads to a platoon, four platoons to a company, so about once a week you went out on patrol, on night patrol. You never really followed the same pattern or trail or whatever. Each time you went out you'd deviate so that if they were watching you they wouldn't be able to ambush you in any one specific place at any specific time. Captain was very astute about things like that. He dictated pretty much variance, daily variances from your norm. One day they'd walk around the compound one way and the next day

they'd walk around the area a different way and the third day they'd walk even a different way, like going basically the same direction but they'd start at a different point. One day if you took a clock and made a circle around your complex there and took a clock, one day you'd leave at ten o'clock and go out, then you'd shift to the South and the next day you might go out and shift to the north and then swing around and shift back to the South part way through your patrol. The next night they'd go to the north and go all the way around. Then they'd come in at a different point than they went out at. So, they were very good about that type of thing. It was amazing at night how much light there was over there because of the stars and the moon. During monsoon season, though, that was a totally different story. You could be out there in the monsoons and you couldn't see the guy a foot in front of you it rained so hard; it was just black.

SM: Now what about Vietnamese civilians? Did you have a lot of contact with them in that area?

KE: No contact with them in that specific area that we were at. It was probably…I didn't really have any contact with the civilians until I went to work as an advisor to the Vietnamese police.

SM: How large was the contingent of Marines there guarding that bridge?

KE: There was just a company there, and then we had mortars, 81 mortars and 60 mortars I guess it was. We had two mortar platoons with us or squads, I don't recall what they were referred to as, mortar teams maybe. I think four guys to each one of those, and they'd have a couple of teams of 81s and a couple of teams of 60s.

SM: What was morale like when you were over there?

KE: Oh, morale was pretty good because we didn't get shot at very much. The Vietnamese apparently didn't care about that bridge that much so they didn't bother us too much there. Once in a while just to let us know that they were there, they'd send in some mortar fire and that was pretty interesting because it was like the second day I was there we got mortar fire. I got a scrape on the back of my hand diving into my bunker and they wanted to give me a Purple Heart for that. I said, 'Nah, I don't think so. I'll wait for something more important.' It seemed like every time they got new guys, or at least that's what the guys said, every time they got new guys they'd give them a couple of days to get used to things and then they'd drop a couple of mortar shells on us just to let

us know that they were still out there. That was kind of interesting. Then I think it was in May sometime Con Thien was getting hit pretty hard. That was toward the end of the TET Offensive. They took us and they left just the platoon behind and took us all up to Con Thien to help reinforce those guys. That was pretty hairy because they were getting shelled like every hour on the hour. You didn't dare stick your head out at all. We were there for probably two or three days and then we went back to that bridge.

SM: When you were in Con Thien, what else did you do besides take cover when they were shelling?

KE: Shoot at the bad guys when you saw them, but you didn't see them that much.

SM: When you left, was the shelling still going on or had it pretty much stopped?

KE: No, it pretty much stopped. They figured they must have moved on to another area or we were just…maybe it was a ploy to get us away from that other bridge. They didn't know for sure. But, we went back to that other bridge and nothing happened for a while until we left there the 5th of June or 4th of June. As we were driving away in the trucks we could see the shells coming in to greet the new guys and I guess they really got hit hard.

SM: Now were these primarily mortars or rockets as well and some artillery?

KE: Yeah, they were I would say mortars and rockets. I don't think they had much artillery up in that area. I've got to take a break for just a second to blow my nose.

SM: Let me go ahead and call you back. I've got to take a break, too. I'll call you back in about ten minutes.

KE: Okay, fine.

SM: Okay.

KE: Alright, thank you.

SM: Okay, bye [ends call]. Why don't you go ahead and if you would describe your first patrol, first time out?

KE: First time out? Scared, nervous as heck. It was interesting, though because I was completely amazed at how well you can see at night. That was even before they had what they called a starlight scope, night vision. The guys used to talk about going out on night patrol and getting your eyes adjusted to the night and I was just amazed at how well

you can see. When your sight ended, then your sense of hearing took over and your sense of smell. So when you got into situations where you couldn't see very well, it seemed like your other senses kind of took over for you. They were heightened. Boy, I mean ever little bug, every creature that was out there at night, it seemed like you could hear it. Then when there was a loud noise, that would startle you, and you'd stop and get down and look thinking maybe it could be a Vietnamese patrol or something out there also. I know the first patrol I went on seemed like it never would end, and then all of a sudden we were back at the camp, safe.

SM: Did you make contact that night?

KE: No. I never made contact any night we were out. It was just amazing, just amazing.

SM: What kind of briefing or operations order, whatever, would you receive prior to a patrol?

KE: Well basically when I got there I was told what we were doing. We were guarding this thing and we went on nightly patrols. But, your squad wouldn't go out every night. Now that I'm thinking about it it seems like we sent out two patrols every night because we were on two sides of a river. So, one would go out and cover one side of the river and we'd go out and cover the other side of the river because you couldn't go across the river. There were no bridges around anywhere except for that bridge that we were sitting on. I don't recall what the name of the river was. I've got a map back home that's got that river on it. I did manage to save my map of Vietnam, where I was at, anyway. I've got that at home.

SM: What kind of traffic went across that bridge on a regular basis?

KE: Just military vehicles. One time we had some tanks went up there, went up to Con Thien and other times we had trucks that went up carrying supplies and personnel.

SM: And who built the bridge, do you know?

KE: It was a Vietnamese built bridge, been there for years.

SM: I'm sorry?

KE: I was talking to my wife.

SM: So from the time that you were there, that bridge, and you'd go on those night patrols, you never made contact on patrol? You only had contact in the form of artillery fire or mortar fire or rocket fire?

KE: Right, yep. The one thing about the Vietnamese, they were piss poor shots; they couldn't hit the broad side of a barn if they were in it.

SM: Now did your unit, were you ever privy to briefings, intelligence briefings, talking about suspected enemy units in the area, the size, composition, stuff like that of the enemy?

KE: Not until I went to work as an advisor for the Vietnamese police. Then I met weekly with the commanding General of the 3rd Marine division.

SM: Is there anything else you want to talk about with regard to your time there with the bridge?

KE: No, that was pretty uneventful other than our trip to Con Thien.

SM: Well why don't you go ahead and discuss your transition from being in a regular Marine infantry unit to going and working as an advisor for the Vietnamese police? How did those orders come down and how do you think you got chosen?

KE: Well, I was told I got chosen because I was the youngest sergeant in the 3rd Marine Division and I had been put up for a Bronze Star and I had a Purple Heart and I knew Vietnamese, although it wasn't the right dialect for that area, but that was all part of being chosen. It took them three days to find us from where we were at. There was a lot of things that went on over there. The captain would say, 'Go do this, go do that,' and you would wonder. We had maps and we knew where we were and we spent a lot of time in Laos, on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We'd send out what we called seven man killer teams to ambush the VC and the North Vietnamese when they were coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail and try to blow up their gasoline tankers and their food supply trucks. But, we were never in Laos and we were never in Cambodia, but we were there. That part of the thing was kind of surprising that all that went on and nobody would fess up to it.

SM: Now was this when you were with the unit at the bridge?

KE: Yeah, yeah. When I went from the unit…we were in quite a bit of combat after that period of time. We were at a place called LZ Loon where we lost over half of

our guys. The company got split up. The captain and two platoons went over on one hill and my platoon and a mortar unit went over on another hill. We didn't find out until later that we were right in the middle of a North Vietnamese Regular encampment. We were in a firefight, on June 6th, we were in a firefight for over 13 hours. Unbeknownst to us the captain and his guys got out of there because apparently when we went over on our hill we were in the thick of things, and when they went over on their hill they were on the edge of things, so they were able to get safely choppered out where the choppers couldn't come in and get us because it was too hot, too much fighting going on. When we were at that LZ Loon they had the next day after we got there they started popping guys right out of their foxholes with the mortar fire, so they'd been plotting. We relieved another company, I think Bravo company was in there before us and we relieved Bravo Company and the gooks must have come in and plotted all the bunkers while Bravo Company was there because the next day after we got there they just let us have it. So we split apart and I think the company commander, after we got back, one of us that survived got back and talked to him and he says, 'Yeah, they got out of there before noon that day and we didn't get out of there until 7:30 at night.' So we were pretty lucky. I was down to one magazine of ammunition and my machine gunner had 100 rounds of ammunition left. Some of the guys were completely out of ammo. The 60 mortars and 81 mortars, they were out of ammo. All they had was their M-16s. So, we were a pretty sorry lot. We finally got out of there and for three days we were known as the lost platoon because when we finally got choppers in to get us out of there, they took us to Khe Sanh and they had taken the rest of the company back to Vandergrift Combat Base. So, for three days we didn't know if those guys were alive and they didn't know if we were alive. We kept communicating. There was myself and another sergeant; we were the only two sergeants that were there. Our platoon leader and our corpsman and machine gun guy and a couple of other guys all got killed early in the morning and the rest of the guys all got medevaced out during the day when we could get choppers in. A couple of guys died waiting to get choppers, medevac choppers in there because the fighting was so heavy. At one time, actually twice, we had to call in napalm because there were just so many of them. It looked like ants on a hill coming up after us and we knew there was no way if they got up there that we'd be able to hold them all off. There were just too many of

them, so we had to call in napalm strikes. Now that stuff is pretty amazing, pretty amazing. You can see thousands of people down below you on a hill coming up like little bugs and the next second nothing but black ash, dark, no movement whatsoever.

SM: What area was that operation with the two hills?

KE: LZ Loon would have been south and west of Khe Sanh and south and east of Vandergrift.

SM: How much more time did you spend with the unit before you went and worked with the Vietnamese police?

KE: I was with that unit from April until December.

SM: Okay, so quite a bit longer?

KE: I was in the bush quite a bit.

SM: Yeah, quite a bit longer. So you left the bridge, and where did you go from there?

KE: We went to that LZ Loon, the one I just talked about.

SM: Okay, those were the two hills?

KE: Yep.

SM: What units, what enemy units or what type of enemy was it? Was it Viet Cong, PAVN? Do you know what you were going up against there?

KE: No, there were North Vietnamese regulars, but they were all Chinese, every one of them. They were all like six foot, 6'2', 6'4', big guys. They all had brand new Russian helmets and flak jackets and AK-47s, I mean brand new equipment.

SM: Did you capture anybody?

KE: No, no live guys anyway.

SM: But you took some killed?

KE: What they did was they went back three days later, it might have been a week later. One thing about the Vietnamese, they always take away their wounded and their dead, but when we left there, the artillery and those guys were under orders to keep that place pounded so that we'd have a chance to go back and see what was there. So they kept artillery going in and around there for three days before somebody finally went back there. I was in the hospital at that time and I talked to the guys after they got back and they said that they counted like 106 bodies of the North Vietnamese, and that was

after three days of shelling and trying to keep those guys from taking those people away. They were all big guys, really big. They weren't like little, short Vietnamese people!

SM: Interesting. So you heard this from other Marines that went back there?

KE: From the guys in my squad after I got out of the hospital and rejoined the unit. I was in the hospital for 20 days.

SM: What happened?

KE: Well, I got dysentery and dehydration from drinking bad water or something out of one of them bomb craters where we were at.

SM: When you were pulled out and removed from LZ Loon, what was your squad or your platoon strength?

KE: There was only seven of us.

SM: In the platoon?

KE: Out of the platoon of 45.

SM: How many of them were wounded?

KE: Quite a few of them were wounded. I was on the last chopper to leave and the chopper that left before me got shot down and a couple of the guys out of that chopper survived and they ran up the hill and got onto our chopper as we were leaving. They found out that one guy had two broken legs when they ran up the hill. He left behind his eight-millimeter movie projector, though. He'd been making a movie of that whole day, but he lost it in that chopper crash. Some of the crazy stuff that goes around, this Corporal Cook, he was popping popcorn and passing it out to the guys. He was over with the captain on their hill, and he was popping Jiffy Pop using the little pieces of C4. C4 was an explosive, plastic explosive, but if you burned it, it wouldn't explode. We used to rip off little pieces and use it to heat up our food.

SM: So like you said, the fighting on the other hill must not have been very intense?

KE: No, not as much.

SM: Any idea of the overall size of the enemy unit you were up against there?

KE: They said it was like a couple of regiments of North Vietnamese. I'm not sure how many a couple of regiments are, it's quite a few.

SM: You mentioned bringing in some napalm air strikes; what about conventional air strikes, the use of conventional bombs and things like that, and forward air controllers on site to help you? Was there anything like that?

KE: Yeah, we did have what they called a forward observer, and he would call in the artillery strikes and also from the ships, the New Jersey was over there with their 16 inch guns. We used them a couple of times. Artillery strikes are quite common; we use those all the time. The jets we only used when we got in real big trouble, like that day. We were in really deep trouble. We probably wouldn't have survived, at least the seven of us that finally got out of there would not have survived until the next day. We would have been POWs or dead.

SM: Did you receive any kind of resupply while you were there during that action?

KE: No, we were lucky to get medevac choppers in. It was just too hot there, too much gunfire going on.

SM: So after you got out of there, you were in the hospital about 20 days?

KE: Well, I went to Khe Sanh first.

SM: Oh, you went to Khe Sanh first?

KE: Khe Sanh, yeah. When we got choppered off of LZ Loon there, our seven guys went to Khe Sanh.

SM: What did you do there?

KE: We tried to make contact with our battalion to find out where our company was, if those guys all got wiped out, or where we were going to go. It took three days and they finally told us that some of the guys survived and they were at Vandergrift Combat Base, and then they choppered us from Khe Sanh over to Vandergrift and that's the first time that I ever saw a Marine Corps captain cry. He was so happy to see us, because he thought we were all dead. We were at Vandergrift for several days, and then we went out on another operation and that's when I got that dysentery. I'm trying to remember. I might have my dates messed up a little bit. I remember, maybe it was June 6th I was in the hospital or maybe that was the day I got wounded, I can't remember now. It's in my little Bible, but that's home.

SM: Real quick question about Khe Sanh; what was it like there?

KE: Khe Sanh?

SM: Yeah, when you got there what was it like? Had they pretty much recovered from the siege?

KE: I just couldn't believe that we had a base down in a valley. We've got all these big hills around here, what are we doing way down here? Who's up on those hills? Nobody! That Hill 681 that they talked about or 881, that was those hills on the North side of Khe Sanh there and those are the ones they kept going up and kicking the gooks off of, and then they'd leave and come back down and then they'd have to go back up there again. I said, 'Man, that's crazy stuff! Why don't they just flatten that sucker?' It was unbelievable, and the base wasn't in too bad a disarray. They'd been steadily restocking it after the TET was over. But, the runway, there was only one runway that they were able to use and at one time they had three runways there. We were more concerned about finding our guys than what kind of shape Khe Sanh was in.

SM: Of course. At this point, what were your thoughts about being in Vietnam? Did you think that you had made a mistake maybe? What were you feeling? What were you thinking?

KE: Not a thing, just wanting to get my time over and get the hell out of there!

SM: What was your opinion of the enemy at this point, do you remember?

KE: I knew that our intelligence wasn't worth a damn and that was had to kind of fly by the seat of our pants because those intelligence people couldn't be depended on. They really didn't know what was going on over there, at least where we were at. I spent all my time, from the South side of the DMZ, the border there, and the Red China Sea, all the way over to the Laotian border, I walked across there twice. It's 15 miles. We spent our whole time doing search and clear operations, just searching out the enemy and getting rid of them. Some of the stuff we ran into wasn't in any of the intelligence reports that we received.

SM: It was during this period, say between June and December of '68, that you were conducing operations on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and into Laos, that kind of stuff?

KE: Right.

SM: You yourself did go and conduct ambushes on the trail?

KE: Right.

SM: Did you make contact during those?

KE: Always.

SM: Why don't you go ahead and describe what those operations were like?

KE: Well we'd go down, and it was about I think 3,000 meters from our base camp up in the northwest corner of South Vietnam because you could see the DMZ and you could see into Laos where we were at on top of this hill. We'd watch the Vietnamese come across and then cut the corner and go into Laos and head south. We watched them for several nights and a couple of days before the captain set up these search and clear operations or what they called killer teams. We'd take seven guys and we'd space ourselves out going down the hill and we'd take claymore mines and set them up on both sides of the trail and we'd put six out on one side and six out on the other side, offset them. They had a killing radius of 100 yards to the front and 30 or 40 yards to the rear. They were loaded with double-ought buck. Then we'd have one guy go back with the cord and then we'd have one signal guy that would go through the jungle and signal when they were coming and then he'd come back and join the guy that had the trigger and they'd wait for what they thought would be the gasoline truck or an ammunition truck and then they'd set them off and we wouldn't wait around. I mean, those two guys would run back to the next guy and then there'd be three of them, then there'd be four, then there'd be five, then there'd be six, and we'd be home. So, we had guys spaced down the hill, single guys spaced down the hill, so that we would have contact with each one as we came back up the hill and actually two guys would be the only two guys that would be down on the Ho Chi Minh Trail there setting up the ambush, putting out the claymore mines and running the line across.

SM: What was the usual size of the enemy units you'd engage there?

KE: We never knew because it was dark at night in the jungle, and we'd do this in different spots because once you blew one area it blew all the trees and stuff away. We never knew what was coming. We'd just figure in that that day was a good day and we'd go down there. There was only a couple of times that the guys went down there and nobody showed up. This was a daily ritual for these guys. Every night they'd be coming down that trail trying to resupply the south.

SM: You mentioned sometimes when you were on the trail hitting these targets that there'd be fuel and things like that. Would there be many secondary explosions?

KE: Oh yeah, a lot of secondary explosions if we're lucky. I remember the guys laughed because they blew up the water truck! They thought it was the gas truck; it was the water truck! But you know, funny things like that happened. Most of the time they were able to get the ammo truck or a fuel truck for refueling. The jungle got real bright then!

SM: About how many of those missions did you yourself conduct? Do you remember, give or take?

KE: I just went on one.

SM: What was your opinion of the leadership in your unit?

KE: Very good, very good until we got this one lieutenant in right out of Officer Candidate School. He was kind of a lame brain. That was…I'm trying to remember where we were at. We were at Vandergrift when he got there I think it was, yeah, I think that's where we were. Basically all I remember about this guy was I think he got there in like September of '68 because I remember in October he was gone. We got rid of him. He shot himself in the foot with his .45 after one operation. Another operation I relieved him of his command because he was getting guys killed. We had a squad that went into a valley and got pinned down by a machine gun and he sent the next squad in and they got pinned down. Instead of calling in artillery and taking out the damn thing he said, 'Oh, we can get it!' I think he saw too many war movies. Anyway, it got down to my squad. We were the last squad they were going to send in there, and I got my guys together and I said, 'Hey, this isn't going to happen.' I said, 'I'm taking over the platoon and we're going to do this the right way.' So we disarmed him and told him that he was no longer in charge and we called in an air strike and took care of the ambush and got our guys back. Just a couple guys got hurt. Anyway, when we got back to the rear area and the captain had his little talk with me and that lieutenant, I ended up going to Okinawa for seven days to Non-Commissioned Officer's School. When I came back, that lieutenant was gone. He was no longer with the company. But, I was able to notice that when I left country that his signature was at the bottom of my orders sheet, so I knew that he still was in country but he was in the rear area, where he was safe and couldn't hurt anybody.

SM: Did your company commander tell you that he thought you did the right thing?

KE: We never really discussed it. I just went to…they just told me I was in trouble and I went to Non-Commissioned Officer's Candidate School. When I came back, everything was better.

SM: But you never got in trouble or anything?

KE: No, nope; just that was a ballsy thing to do!

SM: Yeah!

KE: That's the kind of guy I am, I guess!

SM: Were there ever any threats of violence against leaders that were incompetent?

KE: Oh yeah. We had a gunnery sergeant that came over to Vietnam, Gunny Curran was his name. It was C-U-R-R-A-N. He was a big old guy. He wasn't tall, but he was big around because he spent too many hours in the non-commissioned officer's lounge. He had like 20 some years in the Marine Corps and never been to war, and he so much wanted to be a leader when he came in country. He was screwing up, steady screwing up. I'd try to talk to him and he says, 'You see these stripes here, Sergeant?' speaking about the two lower stripes because a gunny has got three up and two down. He pointed at mine and said, 'See the three up? Well I got two down; I'm the boss.' Well! Anyway, he woke up several nights with grenades underneath his pillow in various stages of ready. The first time he just had a grenade stuck underneath his pillow with the pin and everything in it. The next time he had a grenade stuck underneath his pillow with just a rubber band around it. I think after that time he got the picture, because he kind of straightened up after that. I would say in about six weeks time he went from about 220 pounds to about 135 pounds. He went from an extra-extra large uniform down to an extra small uniform. He turned out to be a pretty good guy, he was just messed up with command, being a big shot, being a boss. Hey, I mean, you've got corporals and sergeants over here that have got a lot more experience in a war than you do, and you're making mistakes and it's going to cost you. He finally woke up. I don't know whoever did the bad things, and I didn't want to know because I was the sergeant, but I know some of the younger guys were doing that to him. I just never bothered to find out who. It

worked out okay because he didn't get killed and he spent his time over there, and he did a good job after that.

SM: Did you have the same company commander the whole time you were with them?

KE: Yep, can't remember his name. He was from Puerto Rico.

SM: Now what about you mentioned that NCO spending too much time in the NCO club. What about recreational activities in general? How frequently could you guys take a break and relax? What kind of facilities were available and that kind of stuff?

KE: None. The only relaxation we got was if we didn't have to go on patrol at night was sitting around and BS-ing. A lot of guys played cards. Several of the guys carried a deck of cards with them and they played cards, played poker and stuff like that.

SM: Did you have much access to beer, alcohol?

KE: No. I got a picture you've got to see. It's got cases of beer stacked up and myself and this other sergeant, we got back to Vandergrift Combat Base one time and we were pissed because you're supposed to get two beers a day when you are in country, and when you go on an operation for 45 days, that's 90 beers that we'd built up. We got back to the rear area and they told us they didn't have any beer for us. Myself and Sergeant Monroe went on a little excursion and we found where the Seabees were. Those guys always had tons of beer. We borrowed about 20 cases, took them back to our guys and gave them to them. We stole a mule [laughs], that was a little all-wheel drive thing they call a mule, and loaded up all that beer, took it over to our place, and then we ditched the mule someplace. They came by a couple of days later asking us where we got our beer and we says, 'Oh we had it coming to us. We've been gone on an operation for 45 days and they owed us 90 beers a piece!' We had these cases of beer all stacked up. They had some terrible tasting beer! They had that Falstaff over there and Blats and a couple other different ones that were just terrible. You never got it cold, you always had to drink it warm. It just wasn't very good. Of course my dad kept me in alcohol. My dad would send what I called a care package and he'd send me these little cans of fruit, fresh fruit, peaches, apricots, pears. Then he'd send me a bottle of brandy every week, and what I used to do was take that bottle of brandy, and because we had to put these pills in our water to purify them…oh yeah, and he sent me Kool-Aid too. At first we just had the

Kool-Aid to take the taste away from the water, but then I talked him into sending me bottles of blackberry brandy to mix with the Kool-Aid because the Kool-Aid wasn't enough to take away that real strong taste. So I had one canteen that had brandy and Kool-Aid in it, and the other one just had Kool-Aid in it, and that's what I carried when I was out in the bush.

SM: What about drug use?

KE: Pardon?

SM: What about drug use?

KE: Very little. Like I said, we were up in the northern part and the availability of drugs was very slim. I know we had a couple of guys, when they were on R&R, they flew out of Da Nang to go on R&R, when they came back they brought back some marijuana with them. It was always my philosophy that you don't need to be doing that stuff. If I caught them doing it they'd be going to the hoosegow. So they were really careful. If they did do it, they didn't do it around me.

SM: I'm sorry, you said he'd be going where?

KE: To the hoosegow, the brig. They knew I meant business. It was our lives at stake and their life at stake. I think the guys that did drugs over there basically did drugs before they went over there, and the guys that didn't do drugs before they went over there didn't do drugs while they were there, at least in our unit that seemed to be the flow of things. There was only like a couple of guys out of our whole company that I remember doing drugs at all. They were flat ass told that if we caught them with it, they'd be going. You didn't need that kind of stuff when your life depended on everybody. Everybody had to be straight because it seemed like every time we went out on operation we got into shit. You don't need somebody all doped up and thinking badly, thinking wrong, making big mistakes.

SM: And what about problems with animals?

KE: Yeah, I remember one place we were at we lost two guys to Bengal Tigers. We were up on this hill and these guys were out on what you call an outpost, so they were out in front of the lines probably 60-70-80 feet, and we told them before they went out there make sure they stayed awake because there were tigers and we ran into elephants in this area. It was in that same area, up in the northwest corner there where we

did our little kill operations. It was in that same terrain, not from the same firebase but from a different firebase in that area. One night all we heard was a blood-curdling scream and then nothing, quiet, and the next day we went out and went down to where these guys were at and all we saw were these humongous paw prints and we knew they got taken away.

SM: Both guys?

KE: Both guys gone.

SM: How many tigers do you think?

KE: I don't know, there was probably a couple, two or three. There was a lot of tracks around there, but you don't know how much wrestling around they did or anything like that before they hauled them away.

SM: My goodness. Now were these guys that were in your squad?

KE: No, they were in another squad. We were on this hill with another company. There was our company and another company and these guys were with the other company.

SM: How would they handle reporting something like that back in terms of casualty reporting, do you know?

KE: I have not a clue; it would be interesting to see what they said. I have not a clue.

SM: You mentioned in the questionnaire that there was also a run in with bamboo vipers?

KE: Yeah, this one hill we were on, we were on patrol one day and this green snake came down and bit one of the guys and luckily bit him in the face. I think it was in the face. They had to medevac him out of there, but he survived.

SM: He did?

KE: Yeah. Had he got bitten in the neck or somewhere close to a major artery though they said he would have died. We got the medevac chopper in there really quick and hauled him away.

SM: That's the only incident with snakes?

KE: That's the only time we ever ran into those snakes. They actually hung down from the bamboo trees. There was a lot of varying terrain over there. We went

from what they called elephant grass areas in the valleys to up in the hills where you ran into bamboo and real thick jungle and other places where there's rivers and waterfalls. Some of the places, that hill where the guy got bit by the bamboo viper, I actually took bamboo and made a cover over my foxhole and then took banana leaves and covered up the bamboo so that I wouldn't get wet. Several of the other guys did the same thing after they saw me doing it because it kind of blended in more with the foliage. It was pretty thick jungle there. We didn't want the Vietnamese to know we were there and we were going to be there for a few days. We were doing operations around there, and I think that's the same hill we were on when we found the hospital, underground hospital. That was pretty demoralizing when they came out with all that stuff that said, 'From your friends at Berkeley College,' or University of California at Berkeley or something like that on the damn thing. We were pretty pissed off about that.

SM: Now had you heard a lot about the anti-war movement before and during your time in Vietnam?

KE: No, no, hadn't heard a lot. The big thing over there was the riots in Detroit and LA and different places because they were close to home.

SM: Was there anything else that was interesting or anything else you want to talk about with regard to your time from June to December before you went to become an advisor with the MPs or with the Vietnamese police?

KE: I'm trying to think if we had any more interesting experiences. Oh, that hill that we were on in the northwest corner there doing those killer team deals, one day the colonel got off the helicopter and he ran about 30 feet away from the helicopter and took a direct hit from a rocket. He'd been coming in about every three or four days on this hill and meeting with the captains. Like I said, there was two companies on this hill so there was two captains there, and he'd come in about every three days and meet with them and that one day they took him out. It was something. I have a picture of him running from the helicopter, but my stupid camera, I couldn't get the picture after that because that Brownie camera for some reason was real slow. But, I did get a picture of him getting off the helicopter and running, but I don't have a picture of after the bomb exploded. I've got that in my photographs. That was one of my rolls of film that I sent to my dad and he got processed for me. Oh yeah, another patrol we were on we were winding down this

hill and the guys in the back, there were some new guys in the back of the line that heard all this noise and they opened fire and it was our guys that were up in front. This trail and wound back around like in a snake pattern so the guys were actually shooting at our own guys. It took us a few minutes to get them to cease-fire. We had one casualty that we had to helicopter out. That was a bad place. We had to drop a line down from a helicopter and we had to strap this guy in and they had to pull him up. Then there was another time when we were talking, BS-ing, and we hadn't seen any action for a couple weeks. We were on this hill and the company commander said, 'Take a break,' so we were all spreading out to take a break and this one guy goes out in front of the line to take a crap and gets shot in the leg while he was taking a crap. So we had to helicopter him out. He says, 'Of all things,' he says, 'I'm busy taking a crap and they had to shoot my ass!' Some of the historical things [laughs], or hysterical things I should say! One time we were overwhelmed by a bunch of VC or Vietnamese on a patrol and we had to call in an emergency evacuation. We were on a hill that backed up to a cliff and we had our backs to the wall. We had to take C-4 and blast these trees over the hill to make a spot big enough for the helicopter to at least be able to land with one skid on the hill and make room for the blades. We got out of there and we hit some trees going down because they dropped right off into the valley to pick up speed to get out of there real quick because the Vietnamese were real close to us. When we got back to Vandergrift they told us to go out the back of the helicopter and run as fast as you can go and go straight, straight out of the back. What had happened is it had broken that cowling back there and as soon as the blade slowed down enough where the U-joints took effect, that blade just tipped right over and smashed right into the ground. So we were pretty fortunate that that helicopter stayed together as long as it did to get us out of there. It took us 20 minutes to get back to Vandergrift. I guess the fact that it took the commanding general of the 3rd Marine Division three days to find me, and that was when we were up in that northwest corner there, but we were away from that LZ. We were on another operation south of there and it was kind of funny that it took them three days to find us.

SM: That's when you went…

KE: That's when I went to work as an advisor, yeah.

SM: Advisor?

KE: Everybody was bugging me, 'Who in Washington do you know? Who in Washington do you know? What senator is in your back pocket?' I said, 'I don't know anybody, honest!'

SM: When you went and talked with the people at the military advisory group, or the MACV, what did they tell you you'd be doing?

KE: Well, first of all they helicoptered me out of the bush and took me back to Quang Tri. Then I was supposed to meet with the commanding general but they made me go take a shower and put on all new clean clothes and new boots. I'd been out in the bush for probably 40 days out of a 45-day operation, so I was pretty grungy and they didn't want the general to meet me like that. I said, 'Well why not? Let him know what it's really like out there!' 'No, no, no, no, no!' So, after some argument, I finally took my shower and put on my clean clothes and I got in a helicopter and they helicoptered me over to Da Nang somewhere. Was it Da Nang? No, it wasn't Da Nang; where was it? I think it was Dong Ha they took me to. Quang Tri was one city and then Dong Ha was the next city over, so they helicoptered me over from Quang Tri over to Dong Ha to meet with the general and he's the one that told me that my orders were cut, so I got transferred from Charlie Company to Headquarters Company, Headquarters Battalion, still in the 4th Marines but that I'd be temporarily assigned to an Army MACV unit in Quang Tri city. My basis of operation would be I would work with this MACV unit or be assigned to it, but I'd actually be working with a civilian from the State Department would be my boss. I later came to find out that he was a 20 year Army veteran and been in Vietnam since 1965 and he actually worked for the Central Intelligence Agency but he was assigned to the State Department, quote, 'Assigned as an advisor.' He was a good guy, though, he was a good guy; I learned a lot from him. My duties were to get the Vietnamese police field forces organized and I'd be the coordinator between them and the Marine Corps and I'd meet with the commanding general every few days and we'd set up operations for the next week of which villages that we'd go in and search for Vietnamese sympathizers, Viet Cong supervisors, food caches and weapons caches. So, the plan would be all laid out and the Marines would go in the night before and surround the village and not let anybody in or out and then the next day, first thing daylight, we'd go in there with our Vietnamese police and do a hut to hut search. The very first one I

went on, we came under fire and the captain of the police department who was the boss of the field forces, he and I after several minutes looked around and realized that we were the only two guys left. So, we went back outside the village and he found his guys and they told them the next morning they'd have a meeting. The next morning they had a meeting and he started from the lowest guy and worked his way up chewing butt, chewing butt, chewing butt, and he got to the lieutenant, chewed his butt, pulled out his .45 and shot him right in the forehead. I said, 'Whoa! Time out!' I had to go talk to my boss and say, 'Hey, can they do this?' He said, 'Oh yeah, this is their country. They can do whatever they want to do.' I said, 'Okay!' So, that was kind of a shocker but we never had that problem again. When we went into a village and searched the village, we searched the village. We didn't have to worry about it.

SM: Do you remember what your boss' name was?

KE: Walter Boiling.

SM: Do you know if he's still alive?

KE: I have no idea. I don't even know how you spell his last name because that was always a controversy between him and I. He'd spell it one-way and I'd spell it another way and he'd say, 'No,' and he'd spell it a different way! So I don't know even if that was his real name! It could have been Bolen, Boiling, Bowling, but I do know that he was a master sergeant in the Army and then he was assigned to the State Department by the Central Intelligence Agency. He said he had a wife that was from Japan, a Japanese wife.

SM: And you are sure of his first name?

KE: Huh?

SM: You are sure of his first name?

KE: Walter?

SM: Yeah.

KE: Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's his first name, because he always talked to me. He introduced himself as Walt. He didn't tell me his last name for a long time.

SM: What kind of guidance or briefings, training, anything did you get before you were actually thrown out in the field with the National Police, anything?

KE: They never really gave me any actual training, they just told me what the concept was and what their mission was. I just gave them what guidance I could as far as from a military standpoint. I think basically they just wanted me there to assist them in a military style operation as far as searching the houses one at a time and making sure that you always had some guy on the outside to protect the guy that was on the inside, never send everybody into the hut at the same time. So, I guess my job was just to teach them procedurally how to go about searching house to house.

SM: What about acting as a liaison between the national police force and Marines that would secure those villages? Did you do any work like that?

KE: Yep, that's what I did. I met with the general every week and we'd set up. Every week we'd set up one or two villages that would be searched for VC sympathizers, and so once a week I would meet with the commanding general and go over it and I'd mark on the map where it was going to be at and the coordinates and then he would contact the Marines that were in that area there and they'd go around and circle that village and we'd do our thing and I'd meet with the Marine lieutenant or captain, whoever was out there and advise them. That was my contact and that's when I'd told them that we're going in now and we'd go in, search the village, and when we were done we'd go out and talk to them and they always took away any prisoners that we got. They were taken to intelligence to be interrogated.

SM: Did you capture a lot of people when you went on these operations?

KE: Just a few people that were suspect, and they were taken back to the rear area and questioned.

SM: And did you uncover a lot of cache supplies; food, weapons, medical supplies?

KE: Not too many. We found a lot of places where they had had stuff there but they had removed it. Nobody in the village knew anything about it, of course. One of the bigger things that I had to deal with was the Vietnamese police guys going in and pillaging these houses, especially if they didn't have people in them. Sometimes when they had people in them they would assault the women, and that was another thing to deal with. The Vietnamese field police were very powerful. They were like God. These people couldn't do anything against them. So, that was another one of my jobs is getting

them to understand that they couldn't be doing this stuff; they were the police, they were the protector, they weren't the aggressor. They weren't to take advantage of young women.

SM: How receptive was the National Police leadership to your advice in that regard?

KE: Well the captain ended up being a pretty good friend and my interpreter ended up being a pretty good friend, but the actual policemen, they got away with whatever they could get away with. You could see it all the time, every operation we went on they'd steal stuff. The villages are big and you couldn't keep your eye on everybody. I knew you could…and I would stand back a lot of times and I wouldn't go all the way into the village. I'd stand on the outside edge and watch, observe, and I also would tell the Marines if they saw any of the Vietnamese police guys coming out of there carrying anything to get it from them. It was pretty well taken care of, but they still did it and they didn't have…due to the fact that they couldn't get too many Vietnamese police or any Vietnamese people to be police, their discipline was almost non-existent other than the fact that the captain shot that one lieutenant and then promoted the next guy and they all knew that, say, 'Hey, this could happen to me.' So, they kind of toed the line a little bit better after that, but there were little incidences that went on.

SM: And how often would you meet and get debriefed about the operations you went on?

KE: Well, that would be the meeting that I would have with the general would be a debriefing and a briefing on the next operation all in the same day.

SM: What about the stuff you did with Walt Boiling?

KE: That stuff I would talk to the general about and tell him what we were doing because what we did was we set up a field office north of Dong Ha on the road to…there's a couple of Army bases out there, it would be toward the northeast corner of South Vietnam, and there was a bunch of villages around there so we were building an outpost so to speak to help keep track of that traffic that was on that highway because there was too many places for them to turn off before they really reached Dong Ha where nobody questioned their movement. So, when I left we were just finishing up that outpost. But, the little village, there's a CAP unit there, an Army unit in this village

probably about 50 meters or so from this compound we were building and I went over there one day and they had .50 caliber machine guns set up in the corners of the village but nobody knew how to use them. So I spent like two days over there teaching those guys how to use those 50 caliber machine guns, which wasn't part of my job. It was part of my job as a person to let them know how to use the weapons that they had.

SM: What kind of unit was this again?

KE: Pardon?

SM: What kind of unit was this?

KE: It was a CAP unit they called it, Combined Action Patrol. It was with the Army and the Army would send these groups of guys into the villages to make friends and help the villagers with sickness and eating habits and stuff like that, hygiene.

SM: I was curious, your work with the National Police, did you ever hear at that point while you were in country working with them the [Phung Huong] Program, or the Phoenix Program?

KE: No.

SM: And were any of the operations you went on designed specifically to capture someone? I mean, you knew going in that this person is there and we need to capture them, or kill them?

KE: We had several of those.

SM: Any idea what the makeup of that person was in terms of why [?]?

KE: All I knew was that they were a bad guy and it was their job to capture him or eliminate him.

SM: Anything else that you remember or want to discuss about your time with the National Police?

KE: Let's see, oh yeah! One time I got a speeding ticket from an MP. I was on Highway 1 going from Quang Tri to Dong Ha and he pulled me over to give me a speeding ticket. This was when I was working with the Vietnamese field force police. I got so mad at him! I made him take me back to Dong Ha to talk to his captain. I literally chewed him out! Then his captain chewed him out and then made him take me back to my vehicle and when I got back to my vehicle the little gook kids in the village near

where I'd left my scout had broken into it and stole my camera! Boy, that made me mad. Yeah, that guy wanted to lock me up, I couldn't believe it.

SM: What was the largest cache that you guys uncovered?

KE: I don't remember.

SM: Were there any significant weapons caches in particular?

KE: Very few, very few weapons, mostly caches that we found were empty. But, you could tell that stuff had been there just from packaging, pieces of paper and stuff that were left behind that were broken off the packages or came off the packages. I don't recall ever finding anything that pertinent in that northern area there.

SM: Did this raise any flags for you guys? I mean, if you were getting ready to conduct an operation in a village and caches suddenly moved before you get there, an indication perhaps that they know you're coming and they wanted to move that stuff before you get there?

KE: Oh yeah. We figured that one of the guys in the Vietnamese Police was an informer.

SM: Was there any way to vent that person out or did you guys do anything to stop that?

KE: There was really no way, because they had so much freedom outside of the actual operations that we went on that when it really came down to it, it was the province chief and the chief of police that were the big guys and they mysteriously got killed while I was gone on R&R in Australia.

SM: Both of them?

KE: Both of them, yeah. They were going down to Da Nang in a jeep and they got blown up coming back. So, I think that was part of the intelligence stuff that we were working on because I know I talked to Walt quite a bit about those two guys and their activities because you always saw them around the known drug places and you always saw them around the whore houses. I actually lived right in Quang Tri village during this time in a house that was a really well built house that was fortified with sandbags and we had concertina wire around and on the other side of the house was the river, Quang Tri River. One of the interesting things I did was when I had some down time in between operations I went over and contacted the recon guys that were at the bridge that went

across the Quang Tri River and got them to take me down into the river to see what they did. They told almost every other hour on the hour to check the bridge for explosives because that was the main bridge going over the Quang Tri River that allowed people to go from Quang Tri to Dong Ha, points North and east and west from there. It was a big suspension bridge, all steel and concrete. It could have been blown up relatively easy, it wouldn't take a lot of explosives to weaken it. So, that was kind of interesting to go down there. Man, that water is crystal clear, just amazing.

SM: Anything else that you want to talk about with regard to your time with the police?

KE: Other than the fact they let me pick my successor, and I picked a guy by the name of John Smiley. He was on his second tour over there and he was a sergeant and his second tour over there he worked in the rear areas as a supply guy. I used to get pants and stuff from him for my Vietnamese police. He was a pretty good guy, so I got him to take my spot when I left. He had like eight or nine months to do over there on his second tour.

SM: And how long after you finished your work with the police force did you leave country?

KE: Well as soon as I left, he took over probably the day before I left and I went to…let's see, I went on R&R when I was with the Vietnamese Police too. I went to Australia for seven days the first week in April of '69.

SM: How was that?

KE: It was very nice, I really enjoyed that. When I came back, I only had about seven weeks left. I think my day to leave was like the 26th of May. So, on the 24th of May I think John Smiley took over and I went down to Da Nang to wait to leave. A couple of things interesting that happened to me over there is one time when I was going…I think it was when I was going on R&R I ran into a guy from California that had been stationed in California with me, and we lived not too far apart in Michigan, maybe 50-60 miles, and we ran into each other twice over there; I think the first time when I was going on R&R, and then I ran into him again when I came back from R&R. Then Dennis Burke, one of the corporals that was at Vietnamese language school, he was an air traffic controller at Quang Tri, so whenever I got into Quang Tri I'd go visit him. A couple of

times, his boss, a lieutenant would tell Dennis to tell me to leave before he had me arrested. I was pretty belligerent. I had a lot of power for a sergeant, and I didn't have too much respect for some of them guys that just came from Officer Candidate School and they just came over there and were doing their time and had cushy jobs and got to play basketball and stuff like that and go to the club, the NCO club every night or Officer's Club every night. So, I kind of picked on the one guy quite a bit until he told Dennis to get me the hell out of there. Then the next day I had to leave and go back to my unit. That was before I became an advisor to the Vietnamese Police. It was while I was out in the bush. I think probably when I came back, it might have been when I got out of the hospital, because I went from like 175 pounds down to about 130 pounds in six or seven days, that dysentery and dehydration.

SM: What would you typically eat when you were in the field?

KE: C-rations, and one of my meals after I became an advisor to the Vietnamese police I had access to these what they called Long Range Patrol rations. One package was supposed to do you for a day, and I used to eat three of those packages a day; it didn't take me long to gain my weight back! I think I was like 175-180 when I left country. I was able to, over a period of time, get my weight back.

SM: When you were working in Quang Tri City did you eat on the economy at all?

KE: The economy?

SM: The civilian food, the Vietnamese food?

KE: Oh yeah, yep. I ate a little bit of dog, a little bit of cat [laughs], seaweed. Those guys were always bringing in food to eat. They'd say, 'Oh, try this! Try this!'

SM: What do you remember about the day you left?

KE: Pardon?

SM: What do you remember most about the day you left?

KE: Please don't have a strike on the air base while I'm leaving! Let me get out of here clean!

SM: Was that a frequent occurrence, rocketing and mortaring of the…

KE: Of the airbases? Oh yeah.

SM: There in Quang Tri?

KE: Quang Tri, Da Nang, Phu Bai, Chu Lai, all them places used to get shelled regular.

SM: Where did you depart the country from?

KE: Da Nang. I came in there, left from there. I don't think I was ever further South than Da Nang. I never was down in Saigon. I was in Hue a couple of times while I was an advisor to the Vietnamese Police. There's several little excursions Walt and I took when he was doing some of his stuff. One time they brought in a captain, a guy that retired as a captain from the California Highway Patrol and he was going to be my new boss. He ate something wrong or he did something wrong and he got really sick. They put him out on the hospital ship, the hospital ship Hope. Walter and I one day took a helicopter and flew out there to check on him and see how he was doing. That was quite an experience, landing on a ship out in the middle of the ocean because the seas were a little bit rough and the helicopter had to time his landing just right so he didn't get pounded when he landed; had to make sure the ship wasn't coming up when he was coming down. That was kind of an interesting experience.

SM: How was that captain, the police captain?

KE: He was pretty good but he didn't last long. I don't know if he was nervous, overly nervous or what his problem was, but he didn't last long. He was only there a few weeks and then he was on his way home. Another time I hopped a ride with a guy to Da Nang. I had a couple of days and I had to get down to Da Nang and meet somebody for something, I can't remember what it was. I had a meeting down there. It was when I was with the Vietnamese Police and I hopped a plane ride with this guy and it was one of those two-seater observer planes. The first thing we did was go to North Vietnam. He said, 'I've got to go check something out first before we go.' I told him, 'I think you're turning the wrong way,' and he says, 'Oh I've got to check something out before we go down there.' So we flew over some part of North Vietnam and circled back around and got out over the ocean and headed back down to Da Nang. I was a little nervous being in that little Piper Cub two-seater. Man alive!

SM: Any idea what he was looking at?

KE: I have no idea; he wouldn't say, and I didn't want to ask!

SM: And you said that when you were working with Walt and he was doing his stuff, what stuff did he do typically?

KE: He basically I think was an intelligence guy. He spent a lot of time getting intelligence on the Province Chief and the Chief of Police there. We spent a lot of time, he and I, spying on those two guys.

SM: So you think they were culprits, or you knew they were culprits?

KE: No doubt about it. We think they were crooks and they were North Vietnamese sympathizers.

SM: Any idea who eventually killed them?

KE: I think probably our guys did. I think an errant 155 round probably got them.

SM: Okay, go ahead.

KE: I remember driving one time up from Da Nang up to Quang Tri in my scout and coming across these military police guys and telling us, 'Oh you can't go there, the VC have taken over the road.' I says, 'How long you guys been out here?' and he says, 'Oh, a couple hours.' I said, 'We were just through there going to Da Nang, we're turning around and coming back. There's nothing going on up there.' 'Oh yes there is, yes there is.' We drove, Walt and I drove through there, and there was nothing going on. So, that was another thing; their intelligence over there was very poor, very poor.

SM: Well thank you sir. I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording for now. This will end the first interview with Mr. Keith Erdman.

The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Keith Erdman
Conducted by Steve Maxner
February 26; March 6, 2001
Transcribed by Tammi Mikel Lyon

SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Erdman on the 6th of March 2001 at approximately nine a.m. Lubbock time. Mr. Erdman, why don't you go ahead and discuss the trip home as you were traveling from Vietnam to the United States?

KE: Well the first leg of the trip I went from Da Nang to Okinawa. We were in Okinawa for three days for debriefing and winding down, some attempts to get guys to re-up for more time in the service because most of us were past our halfway point. The debriefing stuff was really not that great. I think more or less it was just a winding down period before an arduous trip across the ocean. We flew I think it was like 20 something hours from Okinawa. We landed in eastern California up by Riverside. I don't know if it was Edwards Air Force Base or some other base. Then we had to rush to get cabs to catch our plane to Chicago and at that time the cabbies were having a war and they were turning each other in for speeding and saying they were drunk driving and stuff like that. So, we happened to get stopped by the highway patrol on our way to LAX but it didn't last too long. We got to LAX in time to catch our plane. We got to Chicago O'Hare and were unable to catch a plane. We would have had to stay overnight and catch a plane in the morning. I ran into another guy that I knew that was in the military from the same city. He was on his way home on leave, and we ran into – him and I – ran into a couple of other guys that were going up to Grand Rapids and Muskegon, so we got together and rented a car and drove up and the guy that was going to Grand Rapids, he put the car in his name because he was going to be the one that dropped it off, and we all split the cost. So we dropped the guy off in Muskegon and we went up to Whitehall and actually my

dad met us in Muskegon, if I can go back a little bit. My father came down and met us in Muskegon so the guy from Grand Rapids wouldn't have to go too far out of his way, so he could get home. He took us to Whitehall where my dad lived. It was probably ten o'clock in the…well, maybe not that late. It might have been ten o'clock at night when we got there.

SM: Let me ask you a real quick question about the last day or so in Vietnam. You mentioned the debriefing wasn't very thorough. What did you expect and I guess what do you think would have been more appropriate, and why don't you describe what you mean by debriefing?

KE: They just basically talked to everybody and told us what to expect when we get home about the anti-war protestors. Of course we all knew about that because of the news coverage and stuff. I was getting newspapers from home, so I knew about that kind of stuff. They made a big deal out of some things that seemed kind of trivial to me. My basic thing was I'm home and I don't care what anybody thinks.

SM: What month and year did you arrive home, just for the record here?

KE: May of '69.

SM: May of '69? Did you encounter any anti-war protestors when you first arrived or shortly after that?

KE: No, not in my town. Montague, Michigan, Montague and Whitehall were very veteran oriented towns. We didn't have the protestors and stuff like that.

SM: When you got back did you attempt to join any of the veteran's organizations? You mentioned it was very veteran oriented?

KE: My dad was a World War II veteran and he was President of the local VFW sometime prior to my going into the service, so he got all of us guys that were getting out, got us signed up at the VFW.

SM: That was in Whitehall?

KE: In Montague, 3256, Post Number 3256.

SM: 3256? Now in your experience generally, especially there and in talking to other veterans perhaps or visiting other areas of the country, did you find that most VFW halls…how did they treat Vietnam veterans?

KE: No different than any other veteran.

SM: Well how did your family react to your arrival home?

KE: They were glad to see me. I spent a lot of time carousing the first few months I was home, did a lot of drinking. My buddy Fred, the one I went in with, Fred Reed, he was stationed at Camp Lejune when I got home. He was in the MPs. I called him up on the phone one night when a couple of other guys and myself were at the bar and I said, 'Hey, you've got to get home, man! We're partying! A bunch of us made it home, we're celebrating!' So he conned his company commander into letting him fly home because his brother just got back from Vietnam, and we were like brothers. We went through school since 5th grade together and lived together. When we got out of school then we signed up for the Marine Corps together. So, we were like brothers, it wasn't really a…just a little white lie, you know. We weren't blood brothers or anything like that or whatever you want to call it. Anyway, he came home and we partied all weekend. I think we spent probably two grand in that bar over the weekend! But, him and myself and Dennis Brazaski and Denny Cedarquest, we were all home at the same time and we all went to high school together. So, we had a pretty good reunion. Fred was the one that I was telling you about. Well, maybe I didn't tell you about Fred. He got shot over in Vietnam and then he got shot off the stretcher twice while they were trying to medevac him out. His father got notified that he was killed in action. About two weeks later they notified him that he wasn't killed in action. I guess Fred called him. He finally got to Great Lakes Naval Hospital and he called his dad and says, 'No, I'm not dead.' That was a weird situation. But, then they lost his medical records because he was supposed to get a discharge. They lost his medical records so they kept him in the Marine Corps. It was really strange. That's another story, that's a guy you probably should talk to, if he'd talk to you. I don't know if he would or not.

SM: Yes, sir. Does he talk much about his experiences?

KE: Not too much. Tom West and myself and Fred were really close friends. Tom West was a guy from Illinois that was in Vietnam with Fred. He could probably tell you all the stories. He was with Fred the whole time except for after he got choppered out and Fred was in the hospital and stuff. But, prior to that time Tom was with Fred. We stayed together in contact for the last 20 something years.

SM: What was the transition like for you going from the combat environment to the civilian life?

KE: I think that I was probably luckier than a lot of guys. I mean, there was times when you'd be sitting at the stoplight and a car would backfire and you'd dive out of the car just on instinct. But, there was another guy in town there and a car would backfire and he'd be out of the car and underneath the car in a matter of a second. So, it affected guys about the same. It took a while to acclimate yourself to the fact that nobody was after you. It takes a while for your instincts to tone down. You've got these life preserving instincts that have kept you alive for a little over 13 months and all of a sudden you're back in an area where they don't matter but they don't go away. I mean, they stay with you for a long period of time, so different things. I was a hunter and a fisherman and I think that kind of stuff helped me out because I'd go hunting. So, I think that kind of stuff really helped tone you down.

SM: How long was it after you got back that you became a State Trooper?

KE: It would be about almost two years.

SM: What did you do in that interim?

KE: I was going to college and I worked in a machine shop at Howmet Corporation in Whitehall, an aerospace. They built turbine engines for like dams or they built parts for turbine engines for like dams and jet engines and stuff like that.

SM: You mentioned some of the survival instincts that were preserved over time. How about just, I don't know, everyday personal habits that you developed while you were in Vietnam, given the circumstances that you had to undevelop now that you're back in more civilized surroundings; anything in particular that stands out?

KE: At least in my case, I don't remember being a leader in Vietnam. I guess I was kind of a foregoing person when I came back. I didn't wait for things to happen. I went forward with my life. I went to college, I took a job; kind of a menial job, but I knew that the classes I was taking in college was going to put me in a machine shop which is where I wanted to go. At that time I was also studying architectural engineering and mechanical engineering so I was looking at the engineering field. I had always wanted to be a State Trooper from even in my youngest days; I guess that's because my dad was a police officer when I was a little boy for a few years. A lot of people I

respected were in law enforcement in movies I used to watch when I was a kid, Sky King and the Lone Ranger and Roy Rogers. Those guys were all good guys and fight for justice and all that kind of stuff. So, I think having that in my background just kind of led me into the law enforcement field. It took a couple of years to convince my wife that that's what I was supposed to be doing. I just skipped class one day from college and went down and took a physical fitness test and submitted my application and then I skipped class again to go take the test and I scored well enough on it to get in.

SM: Now as you became a police officer and worked with State Troopers, did you find that first of all, did you encounter many other veterans, and did you find that your Vietnam experience helped you at all?

KE: There were several situations during my career that involved veterans. Yeah, I think the camaraderie of the Vietnam veterans…I remember one instance we were going into this biker bar in Muskegon, and this was after I'd been in like 11 years. We were looking for a guy and I just walked into the bar and walked up to what looked like the head guy of the motorcycle club there and I said, 'Hey,' and I noticed he had a tattoo. He was in the 101st Airborne. I said, 'Charlie Company 1-4, Quang Tri Province,' and he says, 'All right!' and we started talking and shooting the bull with him and then I said, 'Hey, I'm looking for this guy,' and he said, 'He's right over there.' So he hollered at the guy and he says, 'Hey, Mac, come over here. These officers want to talk to you.' We didn't have any trouble. We told him that we had a warrant for his arrest and we went out the door. Any other guys might have had problems, but we didn't have any problems because I struck up a conversation with the head guy and we were both veterans and had mutual respect. I had a job to do and no big deal.

SM: How about other veterans as officers, though?

KE: In my recruit school I'd say that there were probably half a dozen. I think there was 39 in my recruit school when we first started and I think about half a dozen of us were Vietnam veterans. Yeah, we kind of kept close together and we'd talk to each other and try to help the college kids along!

SM: What did you think…this is getting close to the end of the war I guess when you're first becoming a police officer. I guess that would have been early 1970s, right, '72?

KE: Yeah, it was really strange that you'd be sitting in your living room watching television and you'd see a news broadcast and I'd say, 'Holy smokes, I just came from there not too long ago and that was a safe area,' and here these guys are getting blown up driving down this road in their jeep.

SM: What did you think about how the war was winding down, Vietnamization and then of course the Paris Peace Accords in 1973?

KE: I thought that they did the wind down terribly bad. They left guys hanging out there that shouldn't have been left hanging. They knew that their intelligence was bad. They had to know; we knew back in '68-'69 that their intelligence was really bad over there. It just flabbergasted me that they'd have these guys in this area and they'd presume that it was safe just because it was safe two weeks ago. You could see from all the newscasts how the North Vietnamese were moving down into the country. They should have just vacated all those posts instead of just leaving minimal guys there. They should have vacated all those posts and brought them into a bigger post where they had more control. It bothered me quite a bit the way they did things, but in the big scheme of things the generals and the war planners, all they see is a map and a piece of paper. They're not there, so they really don't know what's going on. They just know what people are telling them. I saw a few officers over there that had big egos and would stretch the truth, and that wasn't right. I mean, just to bolster themselves and make themselves look better they'd say, 'Oh yeah, we had so many ambushes and so many Vietnamese killed,' and stuff like that. In actuality, they only had one that was actually a successful ambush and they'd claim to have three or four. So, things like that that went on during the war really bothered you, and the fact that I got the newspaper from back home and I'd read what the press was saying about the war, and nobody was telling them the truth!

SM: Was there anything in particular that stood out in your mind as being false and absolutely untrue that you knew, but just was coming out anyway?

KE: Just the fact that we weren't going into Cambodia, we weren't going into Laos, we weren't getting our butts whipped. There were a couple of operations we lost over half our guys, either wounded or killed. They'd say they were having successful operations and stuff like that. It was pretty crazy.

SM: What did you think when the war actually ended for the United States with the Paris Peace Accords in January of 1973?

KE: I just thought it was about time. It was about time they got their stuff together because I mean on any given day we could have won that war and taken over North Vietnam. All they did was pussy foot around. We ran search and clear operations and all we were really was like they said a police action. All we were doing was trying to protect the South Vietnamese people from the North Vietnamese people, kind of like we did in Korea. In the end, they just turned the country over to them, so it really didn't do any real good I don't think.

SM: And how did you think you were treated as a veteran over the years, both if you've ever had any dealings with the VA or just interaction with people in your life, family, friends, acquaintances, coworkers, whatever?

KE: Basically I had a pretty good relationship with most people. I mean, we were like other veterans. We didn't go around bragging that we were veterans or if we had a Purple Heart or if we were decorated; it was just not something that you bragged about. The people that were close to you knew. A lot of people didn't have a clue. All they knew was that you were in Vietnam and that you were home, and that you were alive.

SM: And you stayed in and around where you grew up with your family?

KE: For a couple of years until I joined the State Police, and then I spent time all over the state of Michigan. My first post was South Haven and that was probably 85 miles from my hometown. Then, two years later I went to Ypsilanti and spent some time in Detroit. Then I went to the UP up in Calumet up in the Kewanau Peninsula and found out what snow is really like. Then in 1981 I got transferred down to Grand Haven and that's where I spent my last amount of time in the department. I retired out of there in '95.

SM: No matter where you went, the issue of you being a Vietnam veteran was never really all that significant?

KE: No, it wasn't really that big a deal.

SM: Do you think the government has taken care of its Vietnam veterans?

KE: Pardon?

SM: Do you think that the United States government has taken care of its Vietnam veterans?

KE: Not as far as I've…I don't think they're taking very good care of any of their veterans, but the ones that really need the help, they haven't taken good care of according to articles that I've read and emails that I've received. I attribute that basically to having people in the White House that are non-military. They haven't got a clue what it's like and it seems like veteran stuff just kind of falls through the cracks when you have non-military people in the White House.

SM: What do you think for you personally, what were the most significant experiences or lessons that you learned about yourself, about life, as a result of serving in Vietnam?

KE: I guess I learned that I have a greater faith in God and that there is a bigger power out there that kind of directs our lives. It's helped me to be a better person, I think. I've always been a pretty caring person and a helpful person, but I think it's kept me on that path as far as me personally, helping people out.

SM: And what lessons do you think we as a nation should take away from the Vietnam War?

KE: Well I think basically they may have learned their lesson because what General Schwarzkopf did in the Gulf War is what we should have done in Vietnam; we should have just gone in there with a large amount of people and kicked butt, and let them know that we weren't going to tolerate communism or any exploitation of less powerful people. That's just what they need to do. They need to take charge. We are the biggest nation in the world as far as being a super power. It's up to us to keep the world safe and let people have a good life. The stuff that goes on in the Middle East, this religious stuff, they've had this instilled in their people since day one and they keep teaching their kids all this hatred and stuff. It's not good. I meet a lot of white people and a lot of black people that they teach their kids from the get go that white people are bad, Spanish people are bad, if they're not black, they're bad. As long as you have these teachings going on, we're never going to get rid of hatred. A lot of the kids see past it and they know better, but there's still that 10%-20% that are hard-core anti this, anti that, and until we get those people on common ground, we're always going to have conflicts.

SM: Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about today?

KE: No, not that I can think of. Any questions you have?

SM: I think you pretty much covered the period that we wanted to cover today. Why don't I go ahead and end this officially? Thank you very much. This will end the second interview with Mr. Keith Erdman.