RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS CHALFANT, JR.

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

BASKING RIDGE, NEW JERSEY
JUNE 17, 2019

TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Mr. Tom Chalfant on June 17, 2019, in Basking Ridge, New Jersey. Thank you very much for having me back.

Thomas Chalfant: You bet.

SI: Last time, we spoke about your early life, and then, your tour in Vietnam. As 1968 began, you were still at Dak To. What were those last six weeks like?

TC: Okay, well, back up just a couple weeks. There was a great event on December 13, 1967--my daughter was born.

SI: Great.

TC: When I had left for Vietnam, Michele was a couple months pregnant, and they only sent me there for a nine-month tour. So, my daughter was born on December 13th.

The story on that, we were in Dak To. At that time in December, after all of the battles in November and the build-up that the NVA was doing--we weren't really aware of what they were doing, but they were building up for Tet, which was coming at the end of January. So, we had lots of contact in November and in December. We were getting rocketed and mortared every other day, every third day.

[Editor's Note: The Tet Offensive, a series of offensives conducted from January 30, 1968, to September 30, 1968, by the Viet Cong against every major city in South Vietnam, is often seen as the point when American public opinion began turning against the war.]

It became almost a joke after a while, "How many are they going to hit us with tonight?" and, "Gee whiz, what time?" Actually, we had a game we played. Everybody threw a buck in (in a kitty) and picked a time, closest to the time of the first round landing took the kitty. [laughter]

SI: Wow.

TC: Hey, we had to have some kind of fun. [laughter] If we didn't get hit that night, the kitty just worked over to the next day, because we knew we were going to get hit three or four times a week for sure. I mean, they didn't forget where we were.

As a consequence, in pretty much the entire month of December, we were a no-fly zone. They didn't want to come bringing in any aircraft on our little airstrip, especially after they had had this little problem with getting them blown up. [laughter] So, the Air Force really didn't want to come to Dak To airstrip anymore and the helicopters really didn't want to fly in either, other than missions that had to be.

So, they weren't bringing us any mail. They weren't bringing us any food. They weren't bringing us any care packages from the USO. We were running very low on all of those things. So, as a consequence, on December 13th, the night of December 13th, turns out I was on CQ

[company quarters] duty (someone must be awake all night). I was up, manning the radio. The radio squawked and said, "Looking for Fix-It Green," which was my call sign.

I answered the radio and said, "How in hell did you think I was going to answer this at two o'clock in the morning? However, you got lucky--you got me. I'm here. What is it you would like to talk to me about?" Well, he tried to read the telegram from the Red Cross announcing the birth of my daughter.

Now, we were eighty miles from Pleiku, which put us way past the sign that said, "Leaving Civilization." Radio com wasn't very good. I kept losing him, because he was calling me from Pleiku at the base camp. I'd get him back and he'd read a few more words and I'd get him back again after I lost him. We did this for about an hour, okay.

I finally heard the last four words--I'm sorry, six words--of the telegram, "Mother and child are both fine." I could kill my brother-in-law for having written it that way. Earlier in the telegram was the indication that it was my daughter, not my son, but I never heard that part on this radio com. [laughter]

SI: Oh.

TC: I finally gave up. I told the guy to go back to sleep.

So, the next morning, I told everybody that I was a dad, but I wasn't sure whether it was Noelle or Tim, the two names we had selected. I didn't find out that it was my daughter, who we did name Noelle, until December 25th, Christmas Day.

We had a truce and, yes, the bad guys actually honored it, and so did we. They actually brought us in mail that day. So, now, I had the letter from Michele with a picture of the baby. So, now, I could hand out all of those pink cigars. Oh, yes, I didn't have any cigars--I'm sorry, I forgot--but at least I knew I now had a daughter. [laughter]

SI: Wow.

TC: Whenever I tell that story to younger people--younger than you, teenagers--they almost can't understand that, because of the communications we have now. I tried to explain to them, "Hey, there weren't any satellites up there in the air." There was no such thing as a cellphone. Skype hadn't been invented. I said, "The computers hadn't been invented, really," because they look at me with a blank stare, saying, "Why didn't she just Skype you or call you on the phone?" I said, "Well, there weren't any phones," but they have trouble understanding that. [laughter]

SI: Yes. I would imagine you were probably pretty far from a MARS station.

[Editor's Note: During the Vietnam War, the Military Auxiliary Radio System (MARS), a network of licensed amateur radio operators, provided "phone patches," which allowed service members in South Vietnam to call home to the United States.]

TC: Oh, yes, there may have been one in Pleiku at the base camp. I assume there probably was, but I never got there to the base, I never used it, didn't have any way of getting there. Like I said, first of all, it was a no-fly zone. So, I couldn't even hop on a chopper and get to the base camp.

The worst thing was, we were running out of beer. [laughter] We sort of told the Colonel, say, "Hey, [if] we ever run out of beer, we're going on strike. This war is over." He agreed. He said, "Yes, if we run out of beer," he says, "I'm on strike, too." Beer and cigarettes, we didn't have either one, we were running low on both--and every other supply, C rations and etc. Clothes, we didn't have any clothes. [laughter]

SI: In your job, fixing the guns and everything, did you have enough of what you needed or was that frequently running out?

TC: I always was low on that stuff. Yes, in December, I made a few panic calls to the base camp (to my counterpart back there), saying, "Man, I need some O-rings for the binoculars," in the lens caps. That was one thing I remember, I had run out. I mean, you can't do anything if I don't have this O-ring. I mean, how am I going to seal this sucker? [laughter]

They actually ran a chopper up specifically to get me those parts, along with some other things, like fifty-caliber ammo that the guys needed and a few other things like that, but no mail. They forgot to put the mailbag on there. [laughter] Yes, that was a very difficult month in December. We were running low on everything.

Once the truce happened on Christmas Day, after that, they opened us back up. They said, "Okay, we'll bring supplies in to you and take our chances with getting shot out of the air," which never happened, but that was the reason for the no-fly rules. They surely didn't want to land any extra planes, their planes and helicopters.

So, we moved into January. Now, I'm really short, when you get to under sixty days. My DEROS [date of expected return from overseas] was February 28th. You start saying, "Gee, I'm going to ease off here a little bit. I'm not going to take any more chances if I don't have to."

My company commander came to me and said, "Since you're the only one with your MOS [military occupational specialty] in this brigade and there aren't any that we can steal from any of the other brigades," we only had one in each brigade--actually, the Third Brigade didn't have anybody. I guess I was supporting them, [laughter] at least I was supposed to, I guess, never saw anybody from there.

Anyway, he came to me and said, "We're going to have to extend you," which didn't make me all that happy. I said, "Come on, you know I just had a baby. I've done my good deed, I've been a good trooper. Now, I'm going to get this--you're going to make me stay here forever?" He said, "What can I do? I've got to have somebody with your MOS; I can't do without having somebody." Okay, that put me in a tither that night.

After he told me this, I guess I was walking around mumbling to myself, but I got lucky. We had a warrant officer who was an old NCO [noncommissioned officer] who went to warrant

school and got a pay raise, became an officer. He's a lifer. He only had two years left to go; this was going to be his last deployment. He came to me and said, "Hey, don't you know that you're an E-5 and, as an E-5, you can certify somebody in your MOS?"

I made him say that thing three times. I said, "What do you mean?" He says, "You can teach it." I said, "You're nuts. You're not serious, are you? I've never heard of such a thing. I thought you had to go to some school to become the teacher." [laughter]

He said, "Well, you already went to the school." I said, "Well, yes, but I thought I had to [learn more]." I said, "You trying to tell me I can find somebody with another MOS (who's willing) and teach him my MOS and I can go home?" He said, "Yes, that's what I'm telling you." He says, "I'll sign it and the old man will countersign it. It'll be legal as all hell and you can go home." I said, "Wow."

I said, "You can go pick me one of those truck mechanics," because we had about eight or nine truck mechanics and those trucks weren't going anywhere. They didn't need a whole lot of maintenance. These guys didn't have much to do. They got stuck doing all those terrible shit details, literally, because they didn't have anything better to do. [laughter] So, I said, "Go grab me a truck mechanic. I'll teach him."

I got this kid and I got as lucky as anybody in the world could ever get. The Army screwed up--he should've had my MOS right from the very get-go--because I taught him, in about three weeks, what he should've learned, what I learned in the school in ten weeks. Worse than that, in all honesty, with a little experience, he was going to be a whole lot better than me.

The Army made a good deal with me selecting him, because when I left, that section was in good hands. He was good. Like I said, it was really lucky. I said, "Wow." When I first grabbed the kid, I said--by the way, I'll never forget his name, Superman in reverse, Kent (not Kenneth, Kent) Clark. [laughter]

SI: Wow.

TC: So, in the Army way of doing things, where they do last name first, he would be listed as Clark, comma, Kent. I believe that's Superman. [laughter] Anyway, we used to tease the kid about that, but he was so interested. He hated using the four-inch crescent wrench and torque wrenches working on the trucks. He really despised it, but that was the job they gave him.

I said, "Well, now, you're going to have to put those big toys away and start using a jeweler's screwdriver. That's the things we use in here. A little three-eighths-inch open-end wrench, that's about the biggest you're going to play with. The instruments are delicate, they're small and you need small tools." I said, "So, it'll be a big change," but he loved it.

He picked up immediately how to do the things. He figured out how to clean a lens when we would take a binoculars apart. He understood the operation of the prism and how to set it back in its right place and how to adjust it when I taught him. I mean, that's a difficult thing to learn how to do. Like I said, he picked it up very quickly.

I finally told him, after about two weeks of doing this, fifteen hours every day, I said, "Well, the next time the artillery guys call and want me out there, I'm not going, you are. We'll see what happens." So, he went out there. He fixed the [issue]. It was a level vial problem, like they always were, but he calibrated it. He put the vial in and he calibrated the instrument properly, radioed back to me that he was finished.

I said, "Well, put the old man on," the company commander out there, who I knew. Obviously, I'd met this guy a few times before. He got on the radio and I said, "John, give it to me straight--was he any good? Are you happy? If you've got a complaint, you've got to let me know." He said, "No." He said, "In fact, we don't want to see your sorry ass around here anymore. Keep sending this guy." He obviously knew that I was short and wanted to go home. [laughter]

So, I went to my old man and he went to the Colonel. Basically, we all said, "Hey, I've trained him. He went out there. He didn't get killed. He fixed the gun. The artillery guys, the gunners, are happy, they say. They fired the rounds. They went where they're supposed to. I could leave now, can't I?" Ironically, they said, "We'll get your ass out of here as quickly as possible."

That happened, actually, on February 16th, a couple days (twelve days) earlier than I was supposed to. Now, the ironic story about that, my anniversary was February 12th. I had gotten married sixteen days before getting drafted (inducted) into the Army. So, I was a little disappointed that I couldn't work it out to get home by my anniversary, but, hey, it was close enough. Unfortunately, I always was a wise-ass and I thought it would be really cool to go home unannounced, "I ain't going to tell anybody."

Part of the reason was, I wasn't real sure that I wasn't going to get killed on the way, because we ran a convoy down to the base camp. We were hit. We get to the base camp and that base camp had never been hit except two weeks before, at Tet. That was the first time they had ever been hit. We get down there and, don't you know, they got hit that night. I turned to the other guy that I was travelling with, I said, "Tim, they don't want us to leave. I mean, they're chasing us, obviously." I said, "Are they going to hit us when we get to Cam Ranh Bay?" They didn't.

We got there and we got on a plane and exited the country, but we landed in Manila. That's where we had to have an eight-hour layover. The flight crew had to have their eight hours sleep. Some of the guys called home from there. I said, "No, I'll wait until I get stateside." Somehow, I got to Fort Lewis, Washington.

The idiotic questions, this guy asked us all (getting off the plane, it was early evening), he said, "Now, we can feed you guys, and then, put you to bed and get you up in the morning. You can do all the stuff that needs to be [done] to exit and get out of the Army," because most of us were exiting the Army, "or," he said, "we can call up on our system and get all those guys out of bed from where they're sleeping out in town and bring them into work."

We just all laughed. We said, "How fast are you planning on doing that? You get them here right now." [laughter] So, we worked all through the night. Those guys didn't care, by the way.

They didn't mind. They understood. They said, "Hey, we're happy to see you guys out. We understand you wouldn't have wanted to wait another twelve hours; you want to get home now."

They took care of us like never before. I mean, we had three-quarter-inch thick T-bone steaks to eat, we had milk, thirty-seven degrees Fahrenheit milk. Then, they started getting us out. They got us new uniforms, because none of us had a dress uniform. We don't know what happened to them. They're out in the mud there somewhere in Vietnam. They got us all new dress uniforms with all our proper ribbons and medals and such. They got us plane tickets and they sent us in a limo off to Seattle Airport (Seattle-Tacoma Airport) to get our flights, wherever each of us was going--really took care of us very nicely.

Everybody had to have an exit interview. This lieutenant, he said, "I already know your answer," he said, "but I have to ask it. If you would like to reenlist, if you gave us three years, we'll make you an E-6. You can decide where you would want to be the first year, anywhere in the world. You want to be in Hawaii? Okay. You want to be in Germany, Italy, England--you pick a place. If we've got troops there, that's where you can go."

I said, "Yes, but the next two years, you'll send my ass right back to Dak To, won't you?" He said, "Well, that's possible." "So, I'll respectfully decline." [laughter] He said, "I knew you would." We hopped the flight. There were two of us going back to Newark. We get back there. Now, Dennis gets off and heads to the payphone. He calls home.

I said, "Wow, why do I want to do that? I got this far without letting anybody know. Yes, this'll be cool. I'll just show up. It'll be a nice surprise." So, I didn't call. I went out to the sidewalk with the line-up of the yellow cabs. I point to the first guy in line. I start walking toward him. He waves back to me, back and forth with his arm, telling me, "No." He would not let me in his cab. It was my first experience with the negative welcome home.

SI: Wow.

TC: Now, I mean, this guy was an idiot. He didn't know where I lived. Maybe I lived in Cape May, for Christ sake. [laughter] He might've been getting a really good fare, but he didn't want my money. I then turned to the one behind him (the next guy) and he called me to come.

It's really a good thing, for all three of us (those two cabbies and me), that he did do that, because if he had said no, I'm afraid there would've been some windshields smashed. I don't think I would've been able to handle that. Then, I would've wound up in jail and they would've wound up with a busted-up cab.

Fortunately, the second guy called me in. I asked him, I said, "What about this?" He said, "Oh, half of these guys do that. They won't take you." I said, "What the hell did I ever do to him?" I said, "Gee whiz, man." Anyway, he took me to Bloomfield, which is where my wife was living with her parents. I paid him and told him to leave.

I went up to the front door, rang the doorbell. My mother-in-law came to the door, sees me, screams, slams the door in my face and walks away. She came back twenty seconds or so later

with my daughter in her arms. I said, "Mom, why did you slam the door in my face?" "Well, I forgot it was locked." "Oh, okay." "Well, we didn't know you were coming."

I said, "Yes, I understand, but I thought you'd be happy to see me," I said, "and, besides that, I really have to get reacquainted with my wife before I get acquainted to this little person in your arms. Where's Michele? Where is she?" Well, she was now coming down the stairs. She had been upstairs.

She comes down and she really didn't have this super smile on her face. She actually had a frown. I don't think she's ever forgiven me for pulling that stunt. Her first comment, "We didn't know you were [coming] home. Why didn't you tell us?" I said, "Well, I thought it'd be a cool surprise, but I guess not." [laughter]

Anyway, she handed me my daughter and that was how I came home. The next morning, I had to help my brother-in-law put up the sign that they had had made up, "Welcome Home, Tom." They hadn't put it up yet, because they thought they had time to do that. [laughter] So, the next morning, I had to put this sign up. I said, "This is silly, putting this sign up. I'm already here." "Yes, well, we got it made up. We had it painted and made up. It's really nice and we're going to put it up." I said, "Okay." So, we put it up.

So, that's the end of my Army career.

SI: Let me ask a few questions.

TC: Sure.

SI: We will go back to Vietnam in a minute, but the cab story is shocking. We know that happened, but it is shocking to hear.

TC: Yes. [laughter]

SI: Had you heard anybody talking about how people in uniform were being treated?

TC: Now?

SI: No, at the time.

TC: Then? At that time; yes, we had heard that we shouldn't expect a parade, but I don't think I really expected to be treated, in the airport, anywhere close to that way. I didn't expect anybody patting me on the back or even saying hello to me, but I really never expected that a cab driver wouldn't want my money.

I don't know, that really did take me three or four steps back. I said, "Wow, they hate us that much?" Like I said, I mean, the guy had no idea where I lived. He didn't know where I wanted to go; turned out, it wasn't very far. Bloomfield isn't far, but he didn't know that. I mean, he could've gotten a pretty good fare. He didn't want my money.

He obviously was an antiwar protestor of sorts and I guess it was in his head that he didn't want to, in any way, promote this war. I guess taking me for a ride was against his policy. Again, I mean, he didn't want to do it. Like I said, it's an awful good thing that the second guy said yes. I don't think I could've handled two of them telling me no.

Yes, we knew that we were going home to a country that was divided. We knew about that pretty much when we left, but we knew that we weren't going to be applauded in any way. While we were in Vietnam, jeez, we knew that pretty much nobody cared. At least that was the impression we got.

I mean, in November of '67, when we had these two huge battles--when I say "huge," I'm talking about huge in terms of American casualties. Yes, I never cared much about how many North Vietnamese we killed. Don't tell me we won the battle because we killed two thousand of them and we only lost two hundred--that didn't set well with me.

We lost two hundred; that was not a good thing. In these two battles, Hill 882 and Hill 875, we had somewhere in the neighborhood of six or seven hundred casualties, a couple hundred dead and four, five hundred wounded. These are big numbers. [Editor's Note: The Battle of Dak To took place from November 3 to November 23, 1967.]

When we got newspapers from home, there were a couple guys in my company from New Jersey, and so, we were getting--I was getting and these two other guys were getting as well--once in a while, a copy of *The Star-Ledger*. These "little" battles were on page seven. So, that told us, right away, nobody back home cared a whole lot, "We're seventh-page news, wow." So, no, we knew the lay of the land when we went home.

I had some other surprises, I guess, but I figured out real quick when I started looking for a job, I said, "Wow, do I want to put down anything about these two years that I spent in the Army? I don't think so." So, I wrote a résumé and it didn't have those two years. It had nothing there.

It had me leaving school and that was it, [laughter] with no information where I'd been the last two years, simply because, "Hey, maybe the interviewer's going to be an antiwar protestor. How the hell am I going to get that job? Maybe I just don't write anything, maybe he won't notice." He probably would and he'd ask me. I'd have to tell him, but, gee whiz, if I sent in a résumé and the guy was an antiwar, well, I wouldn't even get this interview. So, I figured I wouldn't tell them that I was a Vietnam vet until I got to the interview; at least I had gotten that close.

SI: Yes.

TC: I got lucky. I interviewed with a guy once at Worthington Corporation. They were looking for a quote-unquote "assistant engineer." That's what I had to look for, because I did not have my degree. I left halfway. I was going to go back to school. This guy was a World War II Navy commander, actually. So, I didn't have any trouble. He asked me, said, "Where you been the last two years?" and he had a smile on his face, because I think he knew. [laughter]

I explained it to him. He says, "Oh, but you didn't write it down here." I said, "No." I said, "There'll be some people reading it that might not like to read it. It wouldn't be in my best interest to tell them, so that I'd never get an interview." He said, "No, smart," he said, "but you won't have any worries here."

He said, "I did twenty years in the Navy, the vice-president of this division is a Navy guy. Three others are Navy guys and two other guys are Army. We're a small company. So, you won't have any problem." He said, "They will accept you very well." [laughter] The guy I worked for was an Annapolis graduate. So, I didn't have any problems with my military background.

SI: Going back to Vietnam …

TC: I really don't want to, but okay. [laughter]

SI: We can move on if you want.

TC: No, we're good.

SI: When Tet actually happened, was there an attack on your base?

TC: Oh, yes.

SI: What do you remember about that?

TC: I remember it was an attack. They probably threw ten or twelve rounds at us, but it wasn't anything out of the ordinary. We had been getting hammered for two months, three months. So, it wasn't anything new. Big deal, we got rocketed that night.

It wasn't until that next morning, when we started listening to--and they can't come after me anymore--but we were listening to Hanoi Hannah. The fact is, we got much better reception from Hanoi than we did from Saigon. So, we couldn't listen to Cronauer on the USO radio. We listened to Hanoi Hannah. She played all the US music and we had to listen to her tell us that we ought to be surrendering in-between the songs. That was okay.

[Editor's Note: Trịnh Thị Ngọ (or Hanoi Hannah) broadcast English-language radio propaganda programs directed at American troops. Adrian Cronauer, then an Air Force airman, served as a disc jockey for the Armed Forces Network in South Vietnam from 1965 to 1966. His experience inspired the 1987 film *Good Morning, Vietnam* starring Robin Williams.]

She comes on and tells us, at, like, 0600 in the morning, we're listening to the radio and she's saying, "You guys need to surrender now, because we destroyed all of your fourteen bases." We all look at each other and say, "What?" We actually had to get on the radio and we called down to our base camp and said, "Did you guys get hammered?" "Yes, we were attacked last night." "Have you heard that there were other attacks other places?" "Yes, Da Nang, Hue, everywhere, Cu Chi." We said, "Wow, so, Hannah's telling us the truth." [laughter]

It was right about then that I knew I had to get out of this place, because, golly gee, maybe they're getting serious. I really wanted to go home at that point, I mean, but it was nothing out of the ordinary for us. Some rounds landed, a couple guys got injured, but that was really no big deal. It wasn't out of the ordinary. It was out of the ordinary for some of those other places that got hit, but it wasn't for us.

SI: When you would have these attacks, there would be casualties, I assume.

TC: Sometimes, sometimes not.

SI: Yes.

TC: Most of the time, they would only fire three rounds at us. Ironically, every time we were attacked, it was an odd number of rounds. The reason being, they would come out of their holes in the ground, out there in the mountains, and they wouldn't fire from there. They would have to come a lot closer, okay.

They would come to where they were maybe a mile away, maybe even a half a mile, but they would send two guys. Now, two guys could carry--one guy could carry the broken-down mortar on one shoulder and a round on the other shoulder and the second guy could carry two rounds. So, if they sent two guys, they fired three rounds. If they sent three guys, they fired five rounds, and so on. [laughter]

SI: Yes.

TC: So, it's always an odd number. It was kind of funny. They would fire three rounds. Ten minutes'd go by and nothing else happened. You'd say, "Okay, the party's over." They already packed up and they're heading back home. They wouldn't stay close and sit there and fire a lot of rounds at us, because they would give away their position. We'd be able to find them.

They'd come in with a sneak attack and they'd fire three or five or maybe seven rounds and leave, go back home. That was the standard procedure all through November, December and January, until Tet. Tet, they did fire a whole lot more. We think they were firing at us from a couple of positions, not just one. It all happened very quickly that night. I mean, it was like any other night, ten minutes and the damn thing was over. It wasn't that it carried on all through the night. They lobbed some rounds.

We were already in the bunker. By that time, really starting with, like, December, beginning of December, we were not even bothering going into our tent and laying down on a cot. We were going to wind up in the bunker anyway, so, we might as well just start there. We would just take a couple cans of beer and some cigarettes and go in the bunker, "Might as well sleep here, because we're going to wind up here anyway."

SI: Yes, wow.

TC: [laughter] So, we were always in the bunker. We didn't have to worry about getting hit, like the picture. I wasn't in the tent, obviously. [laughter] I was in the bunker. We spent a lot of time in that little bunker. It just made sense to do that. It didn't make any sense to give them a target. Why would we want to do that?--and to wait for the siren? nah.

Those times that I did lay in the cot, there were a few times, say, "Gee, I actually want to get some sleep tonight," and I would lay in the cot. I don't think I really slept ever; [Mr. Chalfant snaps his fingers] that would've woken me up. The pitter-patter of a rat running alongside the outside of the tent, that would wake me up. You sneeze across the way from me, that would've woke me up and I would've had my M-16 pointed at you. You sneeze twice and I'll probably shoot you, but I never waited for the siren.

My ears were in tune enough that I could hear that "thump" with that mortar round or rocket (either one, they'll make the same sound), I would know which direction. I would hear it a half mile away. I would hear that "thump" and I'd know it's coming in, not going out. If we were firing out, yes, I knew the difference.

So, there were many occasions where I jumped up (and a couple other guys) and yelled, "Incoming," long before that first round ever landed. I can guarantee you that I was never above ground when the second round landed. There were sometimes I was still above ground when the first round landed, but, if you had any brains, you were underground before the next one. I mean, why give them a second chance?

We got a new company commander once, not too far [removed] from West Point. I don't know, they must not be teaching them up there in West Point anything good, because he didn't have his act together. He gets off the helicopter in his starched fatigues and his shiny, brass "railroad tracks" on (his captain's bars) and a shiny buckle. He goes and wants to gather everybody together, so [that] he can introduce himself to everybody.

Now, the two of us (we were the two E-5s and the two short guys), we just waved him off and said, "No thanks. I'll stand over here," and we never joined that little group. Well, he comes heading toward us afterwards, mad as hell, and we stopped him. We stood up and grabbed our weapon and said, "Stop," about ten or twelve meters before us. We said, "Don't you come anywhere close, closer than you are right now." He was mad.

We said, "Think about something. You've got those shiny 'railroad tracks' on your shoulders. Believe it or not, the enemy has binoculars, believe it or not. They're out there on that hill somewhere, two miles from here, and they can see your shiny 'railroad tracks' like a beacon."

I said, "We don't want them thinking about, 'Wow, why don't we zero in on this target?' because he might be a couple yards off and hit us. So, you just stay the hell away from where we are. We're not going to come anywhere close to you. That's why we didn't come to your group."

We said, "You could've wiped out our entire company except for Tim and me. One round would've gotten every one of you." I said, "It's simple rules out here, man. We travel in no greater group than two, never. You're an idiot if you do."

We said, "The first thing you ought to do is go take that belt buckle in the tent there, scratch it up, rub it in the dirt, take those shoes and do the same thing and just take those captain's bars off. Best thing you can do--it's in your best interest. If you were ever captured, you don't want them to know that you happen to be a captain. Better they think you're a private." We tried to explain it, said, "Look, we're E-5s, but you see anything on my arms? There's nothing, okay."

So, we had to teach this guy. The next morning, he did have nothing on that would indicate he was [a captain]. We said, "Look, we respect you. We know who you are. Everybody knows who everybody is. By the way, we're not going to call you, 'Sir.' What's your first name? That's what we're going to call you by. If that's unacceptable, then, just we won't call you at all, but, if you expect us to say, 'Sir,' it ain't going to happen. We're all equal out here."

"If you were to give us an order and it's a bad order, like you did saying, 'Everybody come together,' we're not going to obey it. We won't allow you to put us in jeopardy, because we're short. We're sixty-day guys. We want to go home. [laughter] So, we're not going to take any chances that don't need to be taken and we won't allow you to put us in a jeopardized position."

The second night he was there, we did get rocketed. We're in the bunker. The second round has landed and the third round has landed and he's not here in the bunker. Somebody said, "Where is he?" I said, "Hey, I'm not going to go out there and go find him. He's on his own. I mean, he's a big boy. He's supposed to be the boss. If he doesn't know it's in his best interest to be here in the hole in the ground, well, that's a lesson he's going to have to learn later, I guess."

He finally comes into the bunker. He's got his helmet on and he's got his pistol and his belt. He's got his canteen and all his stuff, and a flak jacket. We said, "How long did it take you to gather all of those things? We're all friends down here. You don't need your gun. Nobody's shooting down here in the bunker."

"We have a radio. If they break our perimeter, we're going to know about it. We got plenty of time to jump out of here and go find our weapons and join the fun. You don't need a pistol down here. There's nothing to shoot. You don't need to gather all of your stuff. It's in your best interest to be in this hole in the ground before that second round lands. You gave them two more chances to get you while you were above ground. You got lucky they didn't, but you shouldn't lengthen their odds that way." [laughter]

I said, "That first round lands, you ought to have your ass right in here. You can see it--look, we have nothing. We didn't bring anything. We don't need anything. If we need it, we'll be told that we need it and we'll go up and get it," just the little things that experience taught you how to do, but here's this new guy, not aware of anything other than what he had learned stateside. This was not stateside--it was different. The bullets were real.

SI: When you were leaving the camp, you said you were in a convoy that then got hit.

TC: Yes.

SI: What do you remember about that?

TC: Basically, the Colonel had said, "Yes, you guys can leave." Like I said, there were two of us. This other E-5 was also short, said he can go home. He wasn't getting out of the Army, but he could go home. I had to (along with Tim) go around to the different areas. We went over to the signal guys and we talked to the armor guys. We would talk to everybody.

We said, "Look, we've got to put together a convoy. The deal with the convoy is, Tim and me are going down there to the base camp and we're not coming back tomorrow, you guys are, but it's a beer run. It's a chance to get to the NCO club for a night," because they had one down there. "Any volunteers? Anybody want to take a run?"

Well, we had no problem putting together ten trucks. We had two armored personnel carriers (the infantry guys came along with us), one in the back, one in the front. The only reason we were actually thinking that we could be successful was that we were going to have the helicopter gunship up above. He escorted us pretty much the whole way.

He told us that we wouldn't see him at certain points, because he would do some recon work along the way, but he wouldn't be far away. When we received that small arms fire, we all jump out of the trucks and dive in the ditch. He was right there and he put those Gatling guns out in the field on both sides of the road. There was silence after that. So, we got back in our trucks and said thank you and moved on. [Editor's Note: The M134 Minigun was often referred to as a Gatling gun (a Civil War era weapon) because of its multi-barrel design.]

That was the only time we got hit. We expected it. It's the place where we always got hit. On that route, we had to go through the town of Kon Tum and we had to cross the Kon Tum River. Either on the north side or the south side, one or the other, that's where they would always hit us. [Editor's Note: The Dak Bla River runs past Kon Tum, the capital of the Kon Tum Province, located in Vietnam's Central Highlands region.]

We'd have to go across that bridge one vehicle at a time, because it was probably booby trapped, but they wouldn't bother wasting their dynamite on one vehicle. If we had three vehicles on that bridge at the same time, you could almost bet on the fact that they would pull that trigger and knock us in the river. So, it was a tedious trip, one vehicle at a time going across that bridge. We would wind up taking twenty, twenty-five minutes to do the whole thing. The rest of us were sitting ducks on the side.

That time, they hit us about a half a mile before the bridge. It was just probably one guy, out there in the weeds somewhere, taking a couple potshots with his AK-47, didn't hit anybody, but we knew we were being fired at. So, you jump out in the ditch. We let, we used to call that--now, "Puff the Magic Dragon" was actually an airplane [the Douglas AC-47 Spooky] with those Gatling guns on it--but the helicopter gunships, we called them, "Puff," also, "Puff, Jr." or something. [laughter]

That's what that was. They had one mounted on each side and they could put a bullet every square inch on a football field in ten seconds. So, if there was something there, they'd hit it. Water buffalos or people, didn't matter, they would hit whatever was there.

That was the only time we were bothered on that convoy. It was an eighty-mile trip and it would take us more than six hours to take that trip. You didn't travel very fast on these roads. Plus, we're being led by an APC [armored personnel carrier]. He doesn't go very fast. Probably, twenty-five is as fast as we ever got. Driving twenty-five miles an hour on that road, and if you're sitting in the back of the truck, I mean, you're getting beat up. [laughter] Even if you're sitting in the cab or driving, you're getting beat up. Most of the time, we'd be driving at fifteen, maybe twenty miles an hour.

You had to space each other on the convoy. You'd put two truck lengths between each vehicle. Why? because if that guy hits a landmine that they happened to plant, we don't want to get two trucks, the same routine of two guys walking together, no more than that. You only want to get one hit. So, you'd never want to have your truck be right next to the other guy. If he hits a landmine, you don't want it to hit you, too.

That's how I got to the base camp. It would've been better had they thrown us on a chopper, but the Colonel and everybody making those decisions, they really wanted the guys to go on that convoy beer run, because, when those trucks came back on the back trip, there's going to be beer and soda and cigarettes and whatever else the guys could steal [laughter] coming back to Dak To, because they wouldn't readily send it to us.

If we just asked, pretty please, that didn't work. Somehow, the supplies never got [to us]. Most of the time, you had to go down there and steal it--clothes, fatigues. For sure, one of those trucks (the two guys on one of those trucks) would've gone to the quartermaster and beat him up, if need be, but they would've come back with a whole bunch of boxes of fatigues, because we never [had enough].

We had a quartermaster at Dak To. Sometimes, they'd have a washing machine that worked and you could get your underwear cleaned, socks, but we never bothered with the fatigues. You wear them for a week or ten days, and then, burn them. Why bother? We just burned them. It was easier. If they attempted to clean them, it would've probably only screwed up the washing machine. Then, we wouldn't have been able to get underwear cleaned. [laughter]

The guys that get down to base camp, they would've been stealing underwear, too, underwear and T-shirts, socks, along with the fatigues. I mean, they'd say, "Hey, what do you mean you're not going to give it to us because we don't have a requisition? My M-16 is my requisition. Just help us put a couple of boxes up on the truck." We had those experiences all the time.

I only got to the base camp, I guess, three times, but, each time, it was with a requirement to come back with something. One time, we had to come back with an M88 VTR. That's a vehicle track retriever. It's a tank that doesn't have a gun; it's got a crane. It's a tank/tow truck.

We had an M88 that we were saddled with operating. We would go out to drag back tanks that were disabled, stuck in the mud. We blew it up (not sure how, but we did). I'm not sure if I said that one a couple weeks ago.

SI: I do not remember the story about the crane.

TC: Okay, I'll tell you. They had gone on a mission, they came back. He dropped off his crew and he went to the gas station there, where we had the gas stored, because he would have to fill up that gas tank, make it ready for tomorrow. Three of us (a lieutenant, another guy and myself) were walking back from the mess tent. We went up there and got a cup of coffee. They always had coffee. It was really mud, but they called it coffee, so, we drank it.

All of a sudden, we hear a scream and an explosion. We looked down toward the area there where the gas tanks were. Here is that M88 with the fuselage in the back, the gas tank, with a six or eight-foot flame shooting out the ass end of it. Now, we accused the driver, later on, a few times, of, we said, "You silly SOB, you went and lit up a cigarette, didn't you, while you were gassing up?" [laughter] He swears he didn't, but who knows?

So, instinct told us, we dropped our coffees and ran toward the unit. We were maybe thirty, forty meters away. We would tell you that afternoon that we had no idea, the three of us, not one of us had an idea of what we were going to do when we got there. We weren't carrying fire extinguishers, but we had to go there. Our guy is in trouble, so, instinct tells you to go.

When we got there, somebody yelled (I don't remember who it was, might've been the driver), "Pick up mud and throw it on there and smother the fire," which is what we did. We got it to where it was just smoldering and it looked like things were good. All of a sudden, the driver screams, "Oh, shit, the hatch is open," the hatch where he [left] his driver's compartment. When he had climbed out, he did not put the hatch down.

Now, inside there probably were a hundred grenades and I don't know how many fifty-caliber machine-gun rounds, because we had a fifty-caliber mounted on top of the vehicle. So, basically, the four of us realized in an instant that we were staring at the largest popcorn maker in the world. These things are going to start to pop; things were hot. Fortunately, the fire was at the other end, but that didn't mean that it wasn't getting warm up front.

So, we looked at the Lieutenant and said, "Man, you're the one with the rank. Frank and me'll lift you up. You've got to put that hatch down. It's your job. [laughter] You outrank us." So, he did. He agreed, actually. He took off his fatigue shirt, wrapped his left hand in it. We lifted him up and he grabbed that thing with his left hand, screamed, because it burned, and got the hatch down. He had third-degree burns on that hand.

The end of the story is, we (the three of us, the driver and Frank and me, the enlisted guys) all got letters of commendation, whoop-de-damn-doo. The Lieutenant gets a Bronze Star. [laughter] We said, "Wow." I said, "Gee," and a Purple Heart. He was injured. I said, "Jeez, maybe we should've gone up," [laughter] but he was happy. I mean, he got some medals out of the thing, but we fixed the problem.

The whole thing that I just described to you probably took thirty seconds--seemed like an eternity at the time, okay, but it was really only thirty seconds--short enough that no one else had actually come there yet. We were the only ones that were that close, but we threw five or six handfuls of mud on this thing each, smothered it. Then, we lifted him up and closed the hatch.

We said, "Okay, we're done," grabbed the Lieutenant and said, "Okay, you're going to have to go up and see the medics. The rest of us, we're going back there to get our coffee, because we spilled it." Then, we jumped all over the driver and said, "We know you lit up a smoke, didn't you, dumb-ass?" but whatever. [laughter]

SI: Yes.

TC: So, not having a vehicle was a problem. How were we going to drag a tank back that got disabled? A vehicle wasn't something you could just requisition. Back then, they were worth, like, a quarter million dollars, which was a hell of a lot of money in 1967.

So, we did make a convoy run to the base camp. The other E-5 and me, we were saddled with going to the depot, because we knew that there was one of these vehicles parked in that depot, but the paperwork--I mean, they "played rules" down at the base camp. When you were out forward, there weren't any rules. Rules were a bad thing.

So, I remember, we pull up in a deuce-and-a-half truck, Tim and me. We've got the driver of the vehicle in the back with us. We stop at the guardhouse there. It was a PFC MP [private first class military policeman] and he's looking for my requisition papers. I said, "Gee, I forgot them. Sorry, don't have them."

I said, "Look, we're going in there." I said, "See that vehicle over there in the corner, the big one? We're driving out with it." He says, "You can't do that. I can't let you do that." I said, "How is it that you're planning on stopping us?" I said, "You've got a forty-five. [laughter] We got M-16s and there's three of us. How you planning on stopping us?" I said, "We need this thing out there in the field."

"Oh, I'm going to get in trouble." I said, "They're not going to notice for the next six months that it's missing." I said, "How many times has it been moved from where it is since you've been hanging around here?" He said, "Oh, no, it just sits there." "Of course, it just sits there."

I said, "By the time somebody notices that it's missing, it will have been properly requisitioned back to the Pentagon or whatever the hell had to happen. In the meantime, we're going to be using it out in the field, because we need it out in the field." We finally convinced this kid. He said, "Yes, you're probably right; okay, go ahead." [laughter]

SI: Wow.

TC: We didn't give him too many options. We couldn't. We said, "Look, we can't play by rules." I said, "If, tomorrow, one of those tank jockeys gets disabled, we can't leave those two

guys out there. We've got to go get them, get the vehicle if it's usable, blow it up if it's not, but save those two guys. We've got to go get those two guys back."

We finally convinced him that that all made sense. We said, "Eventually, our colonel sending the requisition to the General down here--who knows how long it'll take?--but, eventually, somebody will say, 'That thing should go out to Dak To.'" [laughter] Well, we took it.

SI: Let me pause for a minute.

TC: Sure.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Returning home, you talked about some of the experiences, particularly how you did not put on your job résumé that you were a Vietnam veteran. Were there other difficulties readjusting to life stateside?

TC: There were difficulties adjusting to life, not specifically because I was in Vietnam. I didn't tell anybody about Vietnam. I didn't wear a hat. I didn't, in any way, shape or form, advertise. As a consequence, until I was in my forties, literally, most people that I was socializing with at the time, friends, whatever, they didn't even know I was a Vietnam vet, because I never told them. People that I had known for twenty years did not know my background, because I didn't bother telling them.

Now, as far as adjusting back home, hey, I came home to a wife and a baby, living at my in-laws' house. My father-in-law said, very quickly, "When are you going to get these people out of my house? [laughter] When are you going to get a job?" "Yes, a job--hell, I'm not qualified to do anything." I went to five semesters of engineering school, not enough to get me an engineering job, really. What in the hell am I going to do? I had a hard time, literally, coming up with a job. I mean, I didn't want to go work in a fast-food restaurant.

Like I said, I got lucky to interview at Worthington International, Machinery Division. We were a very small division, twenty, twenty-five people. We were building power plants, using Worthington equipment in those power plants and acting as our own engineering contractor, in-house. It was a good concept. The division wasn't making any money, but the equipment divisions were making money because of us, so, it was a good thing.

Now, I grew up in Harrison. Worthington headquarters was in Harrison. I was working at an office in Bloomfield, literally two blocks from where I had gotten an apartment. However, after about a year, they moved back to Harrison. So, it was sort of like I had gone full circle. Here I was, twenty-four years old, a veteran, going to school at night to try and come up with my degree, and here I am working four blocks from where I grew up, sort of ironic.

It was almost scary, because I'd be there in Harrison and I'd be driving to Newark to school each night. Wow, I couldn't avoid seeing somebody on the street that I knew from high school, years before. I'd have to yell at him from the car, "Hey, Dave, guess who? It's me. [laughter] Sorry, I

can't stop, but I'll catch you some other day." That happened a lot with me, but I finally got my degree, took me three years, going nights.

So, this little girl that was born while I was in Vietnam, I only met her when she was two months old and, for her first three years, I really didn't know her very much. I wasn't around very much. She didn't know me, because I'd get up, I'd be out of the house at seven, seven-fifteen. I'd go to work, leave work, go to school. I'd get home at ten. We're doing that four nights a week, and then, did that for three years, two years, plus, the summers.

So, when I would leave the house, she was asleep. When I got home, she was asleep. I would see her on the weekends only. I had to try and make that up later on, because that did leave a little bit of a void for her, but it had to be. I had no options. Without this degree, I wasn't going to make any money anywhere.

So, that first job that they gave me, they called me an assistant engineer, assistant project engineer, because they couldn't call me an engineer because I didn't have a degree. They gave me a salary of 8,100 dollars--that's a year, not a month, okay. [laughter] Now, obviously, dollars were different back then in 1968, but it still wasn't all that much of a salary.

So, we struggled to get by, the three of us, living in this little apartment and knowing that we wanted to buy a house. We weren't going to rent for very long. Somehow, we were going to have to come up with enough money to buy a house. We bought that first house in 1971.

A funny story, the house, we agreed on a price of $31,500. It was a three-bedroom, little house in Cedar Grove, nice area, nice town. We're looking and we got to two weeks before the closing. We called the real estate guy and said, "We're in trouble. We're five hundred dollars short of coming up with that down payment that we agreed that we would do. Well, we sort of miscalculated a little bit."

The guy said to me, "No, no, we're closing." He said, "I'll lend you the five hundred dollars." He said, "I've got an 1,800-dollar, six-percent commission." He said, "If you screw me on the five hundred, at least I still make something." [laughter] He said, "You go to that closing, I'll hand you the five hundred, whatever it is you need to come right up to the closing."

So, it turned out he didn't have to do that. My mother found an insurance policy that they had taken out on me when I was a baby. It had a cash value and the cash value was four hundred. We were able to squeeze the other hundred bucks somehow. I remember leaving that closing with something like twenty dollars in our checking account and that was it.

That was all we had in the world; told Michele, I said, "Well, let's go have lunch out somewhere. We'll spend that twenty dollars. Why not? What's the difference? [laughter] It might be the last time we can have a sandwich out in a restaurant somewhere," but that was our first house that we bought. We stayed there five years, and then, we had a house built in Hillsborough. We wound up staying there forty years. So, now, we're here.

SI: You were with Worthington for just a few years.

TC: Three years.

SI: Yes.

TC: I left there in '71. What happened was, Worthington and Studebaker merged. You can scratch that--Studebaker bought them. They then called the corporation SWI, Studebaker-Worthington Industries. Really, the guy was just buying and raiding. He was going to sell it off, but that's the first thing he started to do, was sell off all divisions that weren't very profitable. He just got rid of them. Stock went up, he cashed in and, after five years, he left them, and with all their money. It was a standard procedure back then.

Our division, we had one shot to go to him and give him a presentation, because we were working on a project (my project group) where we were going to make a couple million dollars on this project. That would've been the first time that would have ever happened, to have a successful contract like that. Even with Worthington making money on all the equipment, in addition to that, we were going to make a profit.

He wasn't impressed. He said, "Well, thanks for the presentation, but, no, we're going to disband you." So, we wound up, my boss was very, very unhappy, obviously. He said, "Hey, we're all on a sinking ship," he said, "but we're not going to leave this money for him. We're going to go spend it. We're going to start overpaying for everything else we have to buy on this project."

Then, we did some things, like, we went down to Lake Charles, Louisiana, which is where the plant was being built. We all went down there. We had a dinner that cost three thousand dollars, which was insane for that kind of time. We were buying three-hundred-dollar bottles of wine. [laughter] The funniest story of all is, the check comes and the president looks at it, hands it to the vice president, the vice president hands it to the project manager, project manager was my boss, hands it to me.

I said, "What am I supposed to do with it? My American Express card ain't going to go this far." He said, "Yes, but they can't sign it, because it would go up to corporate to get countersigned." He said, "You sign it, it only has to be countersigned here. It won't go anywhere. Those idiots over there won't know what we're doing, for a while." That's what we did. We had to make a phone call to American Express. The boss had to get on the phone and explain to American Express that, "We're putting it on this card, but I'm guaranteeing it. Here's my card." [laughter]

SI: Wow.

TC: Yes, it was on my expense account and, yes, the expense account got paid. We did that a couple times. It was kind of a cool time. We did things that we had to do. We just didn't want to give him all that money. We wanted to make sure, "You think we're losers? Well, we'll prove it to you. We are. We're not going to make money on this job. We were lying." Yes, we just slowed the project down, gave the mechanical contractors some extra incentive money, things like that.

Then, I went to work for a company called Process Pumps. I was there for about thirteen years, a small distributor, pump distributor. I learned the pump industry. In a small distributorship, at the maximum, we had something like seventeen people. Once you become number two, you've gone as far up the ladder as possible. By attrition, well, I became number two. I can't be number one--he owns it. [laughter] So, I took some stupid pills and I started my own company. I did that for twenty-six years until I retired.

So, that's my entire story, man. You know my life history.

SI: You said you had not really talked about it until you were in your forties.

TC: Oh, I'll tell you what, yes, I came home in 1968. In 1998, I started doing tours at the Memorial [the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial, located in Holmdel, New Jersey]. I'll tell you the story about that real quick, but, between those thirty years, I probably didn't say the word "Vietnam" ten times. I don't ever remember saying it.

When I first came home, my wife's uncles, she had a bunch of uncles who were in World War II and they wanted to ask questions. They wanted to know about me in Vietnam. I said, "Okay, we're going to hold court one night, eight o'clock, my mother-in-law's house. Everybody come over. I'll answer any questions you want to ask."

"I'll talk to you all night, but, at midnight, my slippers are coming off and don't ever ask me another question ever again, because I won't answer it. I will not talk about it. I'm finished. That's the only time. Those four hours, that's all you got." I held court for four hours and I told them everything they asked questions about. I just said, after that, I said, "I will never talk about this ever again."

I was kind of negative about it. I mean, I wasn't happy about what I was seeing at home. Here, they took Lieutenant Bill Calley and ran him through court, the My Lai incident. Well, what people don't know, for the most part, is what was happening to Bill Calley and his platoon (I'm sorry, his company) the three days before the massacre at My Lai. They were getting massacred. They were hammered. They'd lost guys. Half of their company was dead.

Well, that sort of works on your mind a little bit. I thought it was so bad that, "Okay, yes, innocent civilians were killed that day, but, gee whiz, if I were in Bill Calley's boots, would I have done the same thing? Yes, I think so," because you see somebody running at you, a woman, hey, you don't know. She could be booby trapped. She could have that wire strapped to her back. She'll get within twenty feet of you and they blow her up. She's dead anyway--so, yes, you shoot her. I could see myself doing that.

[Editor's Note: On March 16, 1968, US soldiers from the Americal Division killed over five hundred Vietnamese civilians in the village of My Lai. Lieutenant William Calley, the platoon leader of First Platoon, Company C, First Battalion, 20th Infantry Regiment, 11th Infantry Brigade, was court-martialed and convicted, though later released from prison.]

So, I was disillusioned by a lot of what I read in the newspapers, what I saw on TV and what people were telling me, those who were not military-oriented in any way. So, I really wanted to climb into a shell--and I did. Literally, all of my friends in 1990, they didn't know I was a Vietnam vet. It was only my family and old friends from way back when. The new people I met in Hillsborough when we moved there, none of them knew.

I got involved in the soccer club. One of the guys that coached with me, he found out one day. Somehow, it leaked one night when we're talking. This was in the '80s. He said, "Wow, I didn't know you were a Vietnam vet." I said, "Yes." He said, "Well, you should have let us know." I said, "Well, hey, I didn't know what your views were and I wasn't about to ask you, because I didn't want to know if your views were not the same as mine." So, I said, "I never told you."

In 1997, I got a letter. The letterhead said it was from the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation. I looked at Michele and I said, "Who in hell are these people? They probably want money, don't they?" but I read it and they didn't want money. What they told me was that they had built this memorial in 1995, a wall. Now, they had completed (or they were in the process of completing) the adjacent …

SI: The Education Center?

TC: The Education Center, yes; "museum" was the word I was going to use, but we first used to use "education center." They wanted memorabilia. Well, Michele had saved all 103 of my letters that I had sent her, in a shoebox, in chronological order, still in the envelopes.

SI: Wow.

TC: So, I called these people up. I said, "Hey, that's all I have." "Oh, we'd like to see that." "Okay, well, you want the first letter?" "No, we want them all." I said, "Wow, okay." So, I went into work that morning with my secretary.

I said, "You're probably going to hate me, but here's 103 letters in these envelopes. I want you to take each one out, copy it, put it back in its envelope and keep them in the chronological order that they're in, in the shoebox, and keep them in the chronological order with the copies. Then, we're going to put these in a UPS envelope and send it down to them." So, I did.

A girl called me a couple weeks, a week, later. She said, "Wow, I know everything about you." I said, "No, you don't." [laughter] "Well," she said, "I know a lot about you from these letters." I said, "Well, you don't have the ones that were coming to me." She said, "But, I can see what you're answering in your letters, so, yes, I almost do."

She said, "We want to display three of them, because there's a story there that we want to tell." I said, "What in the hell are you talking about?" She said, "Well, you're sitting here, in these letters, arguing about names, back and forth, with your wife, 'No, I don't like that name.' 'Yes.' We want to pick three of those letters."

There's one letter that I wrote about a week after I got in-country. I addressed that letter to "Michele and One-Third." Then, there's another one in September that I addressed to "Michele and Two-Thirds." Then, there was a third one on Christmas Day, after I found out it was a girl, that I addressed a letter to Michele and Noelle. They said, "These are the three letters we want to display, because it tells a story." I said, "Hey, okay. Sounds boring to me, but, if that's what you want to do, yes, I'll give you those three letters."

They are on display at the Memorial, along with my diary. I guess I made the mistake of telling her, said, "Oh, by the way, I didn't give it to you, but I have it. I kept a diary." "Oh, yes, we'd like to display that." So, that's on display, also. That's my fifteen minutes of fame.

So, I was invited to the grand opening of that museum, the Education Center. I met John McCain that night, because he was the honored guest. If you've been there, there's a picture of him in his dress Navy uniform with the President getting his Medal of Honor. He did not know that that was there, but they invited him to this grand opening, and then, uncovered this photograph that's up on the wall. Christie Todd Whitman was there (she was Governor at the time), her husband. So, I met a whole bunch of people.

[Editor's Note: Senator John McCain (1936-2018), then a US Navy pilot, endured captivity at the hands of the North Vietnamese from 1967 to 1973. He later represented Arizona in the US House of Representatives (1983-87) and the US Senate (1987-2018) and served as the Republican candidate for President in 2008. Christine Todd Whitman served as Governor of New Jersey from 1994 to 2001.]

It was kind of cool, but it was funny. The reporter from *The Asbury Park Press* had called me and said that he wanted to have me there because they were going to do an article about the opening of the Memorial. They wanted to include in that--it was, like, an eight-page handout in their Sunday paper--they wanted to do this article on me, about a GI who had his daughter born while he was eight thousand miles away.

I said, "Okay, well, that's cool." He said, "Now, we need to have you and your wife and your daughter." He made it in clear, no uncertain terms, "If your daughter can't attend, then, we don't want you either, no article, because we want to take a picture. We're going to take one of the before pictures and the after picture," and all that. So, we did that that night.

That night, the Director asked me if I would like to be a tour guide. I said, "No, I don't have any John Wayne stories to tell you. No, I don't think so." Well, the other staff members all asked me that night as well. I must've had a few too many glasses of wine, because I eventually said, "I'll think about it." Well, over the next ten days, they must've called me eight times. They were taking turns calling me. [laughter] I said, "Okay, you people aren't going to give up, are you?"

So, I finally said, "Okay, I'll consider doing this, but you need to tell me, what does a tour guide do?" [laughter] They said, "We'll give you some instruction." I said, "Okay." I said, "Now, the way it has to be is that I'm going to have you set me up for two tours. If I'm unhappy with doing them, that's the end of it. If you're unhappy with anything, that's the end of it. The only way it'll continue is if both of us say this is a good thing."

Well, I did it for fifteen years, so, I guess they said I was okay. It was the greatest fun in my life.

SI: Yes.

TC: I miss the hell out of it, that I can't do it anymore. They've told me down there that I can do a half a tour, I can do it just inside, sitting down, whatever I want, but that is something I don't want to do. I don't want to shortchange the kids. They've come there to get a good show and I don't think I can give them a good show anymore. So, I haven't gone back there to do any of that over the last five years.

SI: What did it mean for you when you were doing these tours?

TC: Well, first, it was people I could talk to (young people) who I knew were not going to call me a "baby killer," all right. They weren't going to give me any negative feedback. They were going to be happy to hear my stories and talk to them. Plus, I love dealing with kids. I got involved in the soccer club. So, for twelve years, I was coaching and I was president of the club for a while. At church, I was the leader of the youth group.

So, my history is, I'd much rather talk to a sixteen-year-old than you, okay, really. [laughter] I enjoy talking with kids. I always thought that if something I said during one of these tours rang a bell in one of their heads that helped them be a better person as an adult, well, then, I was real happy to do all this. I'm hoping that that happened.

Now, my ego was flying high for a while there, because the kids would--sometimes, the teachers would tell the kids, when they got back to class the next day, to write a letter to that tour guide and tell him what you thought about his tour. So, every so often, I would show up down there in the morning, they said, "Hey, we got some fan mail for you here."

They'd give me a stack of these scribbled letters from kids, which I still have. I mean, I've got two albums full of them. I mean, they don't mean anything to anyone except me, but it tipped my ego just a little bit, because the kids were always nice in there, "We learned a lot about Vietnam," that kind of thing. That's the kind of enjoyment I would get from it.

I would go home having spent two hours--that's all, it's an hour-and-a-half tour, so, it'd be two hours out of my day. I was still working at the time, but I was working for myself. So, I could steal two hours. The boss wouldn't be too mad.

I did have to caution them down there and say, "Hey, don't even try to schedule me more than once a week. I just can't take that much time away, but once a week," and that's how it usually was, was one time a week. I would do one tour, usually in the morning, nine-thirty to eleven o'clock tour. So, I still had the afternoon to work and it really wasn't taking all that much out of my life. I was happy to do it and it was fun to do it.

Like I said, I love talking with kids. You can't imagine how many times they would stun me with a question, that I had to really sit back and think about how I go about answering this.

Sometimes, the questions were a little deep. They weren't simple questions, like, "Did you ever kill anyone?" because I would caution them and tell them that, "Look, there's two questions you can't ask me. If you do, you won't get much of an answer. Don't ask me if I ever killed anyone, because, really, it's none of your business. That's between me and Him (God). Don't ask me what I did on R&R--that's really none of your business." [laughter]

I would tell the kids, I said, "Look, if you were to ask me, 'Did I ever kill anyone?' I would tell you that I was trained to do so. If the opportunity arose, I would've. I surely could've, and who knows? I might have, because I did fire my weapon in anger a few times, but don't know if I hit anything. So, that's the only answer you're going to get from me. Maybe I did. I don't know. I'm not interested in finding out. Maybe He'll tell me. When I get up to see Him, He'll let me know, but it's really nobody's business, but ask me anything else."

The kids, they would start to ask a general question and you can't answer a general question. If they would say, "Gee, what was the climate like?" I'm going to give you one word, "It sucked." [laughter] I said, "Now, you want to get more specific? Okay, I can describe for you a monsoon rainfall." They said, "Okay, well, how would you describe that?"

I said, "Well, do this, think about this. It's raining. It's raining so hard that you put your hand out at your arm's length, but you can't see your fingers. It's raining that hard. You know they're there, but you can't see them. That's how hard it rains in the monsoon. Now, it only rains that hard for ten or fifteen minutes. If it rained like that for two hours, the country'd be under water, but it would rain enough to make all kinds of mud. By the way, we would see the prettiest rainbows. We would see them six or eight times a day, because that rain would stop and, bingo, the sun came out. Here's this beautiful rainbow, prettiest you've ever seen."

That was my first experience my first day. I get off the plane, we head to this tent and it is raining. It is horrible. We get in under cover and the first thing I start doing was taking my clothes off. I want to change. A guy comes in and puts his arm on my shoulder, he says, "What you think you're doing, boy?" I said, "Well, I'm going to change."

He said, "No." He said, "Don't you realize it's going to do that rain six more times before the day is out?" He said, "You're going to run out of clothes before noontime." He said, "No," he said, "you ought to keep those wet ones on. The monsoons will be done in about two months;" I think he said about six weeks. He said, "You could change then."

Now, he was obviously tongue-in-cheek, but he wasn't really lying. [laughter] He said, "Tomorrow, you start out with dry clothes, but they'll be wet by ten o'clock. You'll just keep them wet all day and you do it again the next day." I said, "Wow, how am I ever going to survive in this place? This is no good. How do you get any work done?"

I mean, that was the biggest joke with my job, repairing the instruments that I repaired and the binoculars. Anything with a piece of glass in it belonged to me. Infrared scopes on the rifle, they were mine. If it had a piece of glass, it was my piece of equipment.

We would repair this stuff in a clean room. That's how they taught us in school. They had a clean room, seventy-two degrees and no humidity and a two-mile-per-hour breeze. I said, "Where is this clean room?" There wasn't any, obviously. I said, "Well, okay, where can I set up a target?" because when you repair a pair of binoculars, you have to calibrate them, to remove the crossing of the two lenses.

The way you do that is, you set up a target at fifty meters. Then, you align this and you align that one up and you've got the prism that you have to continually adjust, just a hair, until you've got it doing that. Eliminating the parallax, that's what that's called. If you ever look in a pair of binoculars where you're seeing sort of a double vision, you have to close one eye, and then, you can see fine. Well, you try and eliminate that, so [that] you can use both of your eyes and you don't have this double vision.

I remember asking the guy I replaced, I said, "How do you do that here?" He said, "Well, the signal repair guys, their truck is over there." He said, "Out our door," my truck was my shop, he said, "you can set a device here on your workbench and you put the binoculars in." I said, "But, that's not fifty meters." He said, "No, it's about thirty-five." I said, "Yes, so?" He said, "What? Do you want to tell them to back up fifteen meters?" [laughter] He said, "That's the closest we can come as to what you do." I said, "Does it work?" "Eh," he said, "a little bit."

Then, the first pair of binoculars that we got in, he says, "Watch this." He opens up the two end caps, unscrews them, turns the binoculars upside down and out pours about six or eight ounces of water. Damn thing was full of water. I said, "Uh, how do I dry them? How do I clean it?" He said, "Ah, tricky business." He said, "I told you when I first met you that you had to forget all that stuff you learned in the school, because we're not going to do things that way." [laughter] He said, "We have to cheat."

The O-rings that they used on those binoculars just weren't designed for the temperature and humidity. They just couldn't hold the humidity in. So, even if it wasn't raining, even if it was the dry season--still humid and still a hundred degrees--we would still get those binoculars filled up with water. I said, "These poor infantry guys, I mean, they're thinking they're underwater in scuba gear." I said, "How do they ever spot the enemy? How do they ever see anything out of them?" Well, they have to learn how to do it that way, but it is what it is.

We all learned how to adjust. I remember, the first pair of binoculars that I saw (that Frank was working on), I said, "These are no good." I said, "Look in there--I see three, four pieces of dirt." He said, "You want to spend another four or five hours trying to get those pieces of dirt out?" I said, "Well, that's what we should do, right?"

He said, "Well, you can do that if you want," he said, "but remember," it was late afternoon, he said, "remember, we have to get this pair of binoculars over to Charlie Company tonight, because they're leaving at 0600. They're on patrol. So, we don't want to open this up anymore. It's clean enough. It's the best we can do in the amount of time that we have. We can't spend four hours anymore."

He said, "You'll learn this real quick, that you just can't spend that kind of time. You clean them as best you can, you get rid of the parallax as best you can and you hand them back to them. They're better than what they handed you." I said, "Okay."

I said, "What about the instruments on the guns?" He said, "Well, there's not a whole lot we can do. We can't disassemble it out there in the field. That would be a disaster," he said, "but you'll go out there and, if all that has happened is that the little level vial has been broken," which it always happened, "if you can calibrate the unit, and then, be able to set that level vial to that calibration," he said, "then, that's all you worry about."

I said, "Well, what about this?" there was also a sight on it. He said, "Oh, forget that--they don't even use it. They're not looking at the guy down the hill to shoot at. They're firing these things a mile-and-a-half that way." He said, "They don't even bother with that. Don't even take it apart." I said, "Oh, okay." It was just we were taught how to do all this stateside. We weren't taught how to do it out there in the field in Vietnam.

He taught me one thing, showed it to me, told me about it. He said, "The USO sends us these care packages." There's toilet paper, there's always a sewing kit, like as if we're going to be doing any of that, but there would be writing pads and pencils. He said, "There's always a bunch of Bazooka bubble gum." He said, "You don't let anybody take that. That's yours."

I looked at him, "What do you mean? What are you talking about?" "Well," he said, "we set those level vials on the instruments in plaster of Paris." He said, "What if you don't have any plaster of Paris?" I said, "Well, I guess I can't fix the damn thing." He said, "No, no. That's why the bubble gum." He said, "You go out there into the firebase, chew up a whole bunch of it, stick it at both ends of that level vial. It'll work for about five or six hours, until that gum dries out and falls out." He says, "So, you just bought them five or six hours that they can use that gun."

He said, "Then, what you do is, you get right back on that chopper and you tell the guy, 'No, no, don't take me back to my camp. [Take me] back to the base camp.' You get down there and you stand there until somebody hands you a couple of vials of the plaster of Paris. Then, you go right back up to that firebase, take out the bubble gum and do it right," he said, "but, in the meantime, you didn't tell those guys that they can't use this gun this afternoon." He said, "You don't want to do that. Those guns are protecting some good guys."

That happened to me once. I had to do it once, but, if Frank had never told me this, shit, I didn't ever learn. I wouldn't have been able to figure that out by myself. He said he didn't come up with it. Somebody taught him, but none of this was put in any instruction manuals, okay. They really should. They should've gone back to the school and taught the guys learning that you could do this in a pinch. It worked. I mean, it worked for [a bit].

I remember the Company Commander looking over my shoulder, seeing what I'm doing, saying, "Now, what are you doing there?" I said, "Well, first, you do understand that I outrank you out here with regard to this piece of equipment. You're not the boss; I am." I said, "Now, I'm fixing this thing so that you can use it temporarily, for the next couple hours. If you don't want me to

do that, I'll leave," I said, "but I assume you want to be able to shoot this gun an hour from now if you need to." I said, "I'm giving you that availability."

He says, "Does it work?" I said, "I'm telling you it works. I won't leave here and tell you you can shoot this gun unless I'm sure it will work." They wanted to fire a round just for kicks, to find out. The round went where it was supposed to go and I said, "See? Now, your best interest is to stop talking with me and wasting my time, because, now, I've got to go find some plaster of Paris. I'll be back once I get it and I'll do it right."

Field expediency was something you had to do. I remember, once, the infantry guys come in from a patrol and they bring me six pair of binoculars. It was like, I don't know, I want to say it was 1100 hours, 1000, 1100. They said, "We need them back tonight." I said, "What? You don't understand. It takes three or four hours to fix one of these suckers. What do you think, I've got five guys working for me?"

"Well, we got to head out again tomorrow." I said, "Okay. You won't have them tonight, but what time you leaving tomorrow?" "0600." "I'll be there at 0530 and you'll have your six pair of binoculars back. They probably won't be real good, but they'll be the best I can do. I will work all night to get them to you. I'll do that. I'm not going to shirk that responsibility. I'll try my best. I'll put in as many hours as I have and we'll do the best possible job we can."

I talked my gun mechanic into staying up with me that night. He could help me on some things. He could take one apart and put it in front of the fan, so [that] it was starting to dry out. So, he worked with me the entire time. He would put one back together. Then, I'd say, "Okay, this one's about ready. We can put the lens cap back on and tighten it up." He would do that. So, the two of us worked all night.

0530, we went over there and we handed this lieutenant his six binoculars. I said, "Now, don't do this again. I did it this one time, but don't think I can do this again, because we probably can't." I said, "You've got to give me some time." I said, "However, here they are." He looked in them, he said, "Hey, these are pretty good." I said, "Yes, well, that's the best I can do in this much time. By the way, now, I've got to go get some sleep." [laughter] You had to do those kinds of things.

The one thing I would always say to everyone during my tour of duty--I mean, I was no hero. I hate that word to begin with. The heroes are the guys who have their names on the Wall--but I never half stepped. I always did a hundred percent. I wasn't perfect. For damn sure, I wasn't perfect, but I always gave a hundred percent effort. I never cut any corners. I did exactly what I thought I could do to the best of my ability. So, I'm kind of proud about that.

The biggest thing, I guess, I'm proud of is, no one ever came to me accusing me that I may have miscalibrated one of those instruments on one of those guns and there was a short round that killed a couple good guys.

I wouldn't have been able to live with that if that were true, if I had done that, because when I would go out there, I would calibrate the instrument. Then, I would start the entire process of

calibrating it all over again, do it again, just to make sure that I'm right, bring that gun up and down and up and down, make sure it's exactly where it's supposed to be every time.

Yes, I never wanted to ever hear that some good guys got hurt with a short round on a gun that I repaired--never happened. No one ever came to me with that. I heard stories of short rounds, but nobody ever came to me with the idea that I may have done it, because, in order to get one of those rounds to go in the right place, five people have to do their job correctly.

The spotter (the infantry spotter, the guy with the binoculars), he's got to properly come up with the coordinates of where the bad guys are that he saw. He's got to relay that to what they called the spotter in the artillery. That spotter has to hear those numbers correctly. "Nine" and "five" can be misinterpreted on the radio, lots of other things can be misinterpreted. Sometimes, you just don't hear well enough, but he has to get those coordinates correctly.

Then, he's got to do his calculation. He's got a map. He's got to do his calculation, knowing, "Here's the bad guys. Here's us. How high of an elevation and how much charge do we [use]?" He would do those calculations. He would then tell the gunner out at the gun what the elevation would be, "You've got to elevate that gun 470 mils." Mils is a tenth of a degree, so, that'd be forty-seven degrees. "You've got to put three bags of charge," and that'll make it go that mile-and-a-half to where the target is.

If he miscalculated, the round could go somewhere else. If he did his calculation and, somehow, only two bags of charge got into the gun--the gunner misheard, he didn't hear three, he heard two and he put two bags--well, instead of going here, that thing's going to be five hundred yards short. That might just well be where the good guys are.

So, all of those people--the infantry spotter, the artillery spotter, the two gunners and me--all had to do their jobs correctly in order for that round to go in the right place. Hey, we're all human--mistakes happen. Short rounds happened a lot. I hate to say that was true. I don't believe it ever happened because of me. One of those other four guys made the mistake.

I've told you my entire life story, Shaun. [laughter]

SI: I appreciate it.

TC: If you've got anything more, please.

SI: Obviously, there have been some long-lasting effects from your time in the service. Do you want to talk about any of those?

TC: Yes. First, about ten years ago (meaning I had been home for forty years already), my wife told me something. That was that when I came home, I was quite a bit different from the guy she had sent off. In fact, she wasn't real sure she liked the guy that she got back. I guess she liked me enough that she kept me, but that was really a revelation to me.

I said, "Whoa, I'm no different. How was I different?" She just said it was my gruffness. I would react to something quickly and negatively, if it was something negative to me, and sometimes violently. She said, "That wasn't like you before. You would think about things before you erupted, but your fuse was very short." I said, "Okay, I didn't know that. I didn't see that myself, but I will surely take that in mind and see what I can do to change that." [laughter]

The other thing is, one time, once again, old Dr. Petronco in my PTSD meeting started the meeting by asking those of us that were on this side of the table, facing the entrance, "Do you guys always sit where you can see the entrance?" We all said, "No, we just happened to sit here." He said, "Well, think about that for a while, because you're probably lying to yourself."

I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "Well, many of you won't turn your back on a potential threat. You're going to want to see it coming, and so, you're always on guard duty. So, you're going to stand there looking at the front door." He said, "When you go to a restaurant, do you sit in the booth on the side facing the entrance or on the other side?" I said, "I sit on either side."

Well, I came home and I talked to Michele about our meeting. Then, I said, "Yes, Dr. Mike said this stupid thing about always being on guard duty and sitting at a restaurant where you face the entrance." She said, "Oh, you always do that. I always sit the other one, so that you can sit there and be comfortable." She said, "I've known you've done that for all these years." I said, "What? You never said anything." She said, "Well, what was there to say? You wanted to sit there and I understood why. So, that's that."

So, here, I was doing something for, I don't know, fifty years (well, forty-five years) that I didn't know. I did it subconsciously. I did not do it intentionally, but, now, since she's pointed it out to me, we go to a restaurant and I intentionally, at least half of the time, sit in the other direction. I don't stare at the front door. [laughter]

It's little things like that that did stick with you, because, yes, when you're on guard duty, you're not going to look back here. There's no threat back here. The threat's over in front of you. You're going to keep looking in front of you, where the threat would come.

Now, I still have a problem (it's kind of funny), I really shook up my dental assistant here a couple years ago. I sit in the dentist's chair and he's going to put on the little bib, but he came up behind me. All of a sudden, this thing is coming over my head. I grabbed him and I almost broke his wrist.

Now, I realized it was just him and I shouldn't have done that. I said, "But, man," I've forgotten his name now, I said, "you just can't come up behind one of us like that, nice and quiet. You can't do that." I said, "You're going to get your arm broken. One of us will kill you." So, that's something that, just, it's a reaction.

I know one guy--now, I don't have much of a PTSD problem, in my mind, even though the VA [Veterans Affairs] gave me a seventy-percent award. So, maybe there is something there that I'm still denying, but I'm not bad. I know one guy who, if he's walking on a sidewalk and a truck goes by and downshifts and backfires, he dives under a car. That explosion is too much. Fourth

of July, I mean, he can't leave the house. He's got to have earplugs in and doesn't leave the house. It would drive him insane. I don't have that problem. I can watch fireworks, okay.

One little thing that has stuck with me for all of these years, I did it yesterday out at the patio on the pool. My kids used to always be amazed--when they were younger, they're not amazed anymore--but my son-in-law was, because he had never seen me do this before. I, all of a sudden, said, "Here comes one," meaning a helicopter.

They're all looking in the air. You can't see it. I said, "No, wait thirty seconds, he'll be here. He's coming." He would come and they would see it. They would say, "How in hell? First of all, we didn't even hear it. Second, how did you know it was a helicopter and not an airplane?" I said, "Well, they make different noises."

I said, "It was just something that we were subjected to every day, fifty times a day. So, when I hear that sound, I know what it is." I asked my kids, I said, "I've never been wrong all these years, have I?" I said, "Never once over the clouds came a plane, was it?" I said, "It was always a helicopter, wasn't it?" "Yes, we don't think you ever made a mistake on that." I said, "Well, I never will, because, yes, I know what the thing sounds like."

Yes, that rotary airplane--that's what helicopters are, by the way. They are rotary planes, rotary wings. There's fixed wings and rotary wings. I said, "They make a different noise than that jet engine. They make a lot of different noise. You don't have that, 'Womp, womp, womp,' with the jet engine. I can hear that, 'Womp, womp,' a couple miles away."

I don't have to see the plane, I could just hear them, and my hearing's not all that great. It used to be better, but I did this here yesterday. We're out there and my son-in-law says, "That guy was way far away. When we saw him, he was a mile away." I said, "Yes, he was maybe two miles away. I don't know where he was. I know where he was coming from, I know he was heading this way. That much I could tell you. I knew that." Yes, I knew it was a helicopter.

So, it's the little things like that, I guess, changed. It hardened me. I would think that when I got drafted, politically, I was middle of the road, okay. I'm not middle of the road anymore. I'm so far conservative that you will never budge me an inch anymore. I have no use for liberals, sorry. If you happen to be one, I'm sorry, but I'm really hardened on all that. I'm hardened on the NRA--don't take the right to our guns away. We ought to have them, because we might need them.

I shouldn't get started on the politics. I'll make one statement there. I will start thinking about helping out these so-called Dreamers, the children of illegal aliens, immigrants, right after every one of the forty thousand homeless vets has a roof over his head and a job. Once the government figures out how to do that, which I think is a higher priority, then, I'll start thinking about some of my money going to take care of the Dreamers, but not right now.

[Editor's Note: The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM Act), legislation that gives undocumented residents who were minors when they entered the nation certain rights and a path to citizenship, was passed on August 1, 2001.]

We have a higher priority on [homeless veterans]. Every time I hear of or see a homeless vet, and I understand some of them are drug addicts, and so on, and so on--well, hey, how'd that happen? You can point to Vietnam. A lot of that happened because of their head problems that they have because of their tour of duty. I said, "But, we still have to take care of them. If this government doesn't have enough money to take care of that homeless guy, find a way to have a roof over his head and a job, well, then, how do they have enough money to take care of some illegal immigrant?" Just, that's where I'm hardened.

I saw bad things in Vietnam. Like I said before, when we drove up the first time, up to that Dak To camp, as we're riding close, the guy in the truck before us says, "There's the village over there on the right." We look over on the right and there wasn't anything there. It had been burned to the ground. There was no building whatsoever. Everything was burnt.

The people were all killed, the adults. They left 103 kids, probably maybe eleven, twelve years old and younger. Teenagers, if the girl was pretty, they took her. She wasn't, they killed her. Teenage boys, they put a pistol to his ear and said, "How would you like to join our army?" usually took the kid I guess about three seconds to make the right decision on that.

So, when we got there, what I saw was 103 little kids who had now been traumatized enough--you talk about PTSD, these kids were traumatized. They had seen their home destroyed, their parents killed, their older sister killed, their older brother taken away, their aunts and uncles killed and, here they are, hanging out with some GIs.

We had a little three or four-year-old. We didn't know how old she was. She did not speak. She was traumatized to the point that she could not talk. We asked her her name, we got nothing. So, we named her. We called her Kim. She eventually got to understand, when we said, "Kim," she responded, she came to us.

She would come to us every morning. She toddled over from this barracks that they had built to house the kids. She would walk over. We had a feather duster--please do not ask me who had it or where it came from or why somebody would have a feather duster, but we did. We had one. [laughter] We handed it to her and we showed her what to do with it. So, she would go to each one of our cots and feather dust. Then, we would feed her breakfast, C rations. She wouldn't take the C rations if she first had not done her work, but she never spoke.

I mean, we all fell in love with this little thing. How can you hate a three-year-old little girl? We don't know what happened to her. She couldn't have had a great life, but, hopefully, she survived and, hopefully, us being kind to her for a couple weeks until they--one day, they took them away. One day, just all of a sudden, they weren't there. We don't know what happened.

The 173rd Airborne guys that were taking care of them when we first got there, they said, "Ah, we don't have to babysit anymore." We said, "No, you've got it all wrong, you still do." [laughter] Then, when they took the kids away, where they took them, we don't know. They took them somewhere. That company of the 173rd said, "Well, now, we can go out there and do some real work." Yes, we said, "You might have been better off babysitting."

Seeing things like that, how could people do that? How could they do that? Well, the reason they did it is because the terrain was such that our camp was in a valley and the Ho Chi Minh Trail entered South Vietnam at a place where the river made a sharp, almost ninety-degree turn, okay. Right here, at that gap, that water gap, was the tri-border--Cambodia, Laos and South Vietnam. The river was very shallow at that area and not very wide because of the turn it's making. So, it was the perfect place to cross it.

[Editor's Note: The Ho Chi Minh Trail was a route used by the North Vietnamese to get supplies and men into South Vietnam that ran through Cambodia and Laos.]

They would bring their stuff across at night through there. They would then come--I guess it was about ten miles, it was a long hike--to where we were, eight or ten. If you then made a right turn, you would be heading straight down towards Saigon, past Pleiku and continue on the way to Saigon. The Ho Chi Minh Trail, that was how it ran.

The problem was that since they put us in that valley--and the reason they destroyed the village of Dak To was, it was in the way, okay. It was up on this little mesa, but they could move up on that. It wasn't a mountain. Then, we sat there in this valley, and so, we made it more difficult for them. They had to now carry their materiel and stuff, heading toward Saigon for Tet, they had to go up and over one of those mountains. That's why the Army brought us there. We were just standing in the way.

That's why they harassed us by rocketing us every night, making sure we didn't get any sleep. That was their plan, but they really didn't attack us. They never came on the ground attacking us. I don't think they wanted to lose as many as they would've lost, but we made their trip toward Saigon a little bit more difficult. That's all we did. We were in their way, and so, they had to go around us and they did, because, somehow, they got all that materiel down there to Cu Chi. They sure did hit Cu Chi and Saigon on Tet. They hit Pleiku as well.

So, I don't know if we stopped them a whole lot, but that's why they destroyed the village. That's why we were sent up there, to be in the way, just like the village used to be in the way. Our commanders knew that they were building up to something. They didn't know what, but they knew that they were building up to something.

SI: Is there anything else you would like to add or are you all talked out for today?

TC: Yes, I think I talked too much. [laughter]

SI: All right, thank you very much. Again, I appreciate it.

TC: I hope it's semi-useful.

SI: It is, absolutely.

----------END OF TRANSCRIPT----------

Transcribed by Jesse Braddell 12/28/2019
Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/14/2021
Reviewed by Thomas Chalfant, Jr. 3/1/2021