

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam War Combat

Personal Experience

O. H. 1234

EMIL J. THOMAS, JR.

Interviewed

by

John B. Jamieson

on

July 8, 1989

EMIL J. THOMAS, JR.

Emil Thomas, Jr. was born on February 19, 1949, in Youngstown, Ohio. He grew up in the Youngstown area and graduated from Chaney High School in 1967. His father was a die-setter in a muffler shop in the area. He has one younger sister.

Emil joined the Marine Corps directly after finishing high school in 1967. He was not in jeopardy of being drafted, but was interested in the opportunity the Marines offered. He went to Marine "boot camp" at Parris Island and then received advanced training in communications and codes. He then went to Camp Lejeune for "Recon" training.

In the fall of 1967 Emil arrived in Vietnam, where he would eventually serve two tours of duty. His first base in Vietnam was in the Da Nang area, but he saw action in many parts of Vietnam during his tours.

Emil describes various "booby traps" which the communist forces used to injure the troops in the field. Instruction in the latest of these weapons was given. Emil's duty assignments consisted of patrols into jungle areas in search of hostile forces. His group usually consisted of five men, who were instructed to avoid contact with the enemy. When enemy forces were located, artillery or air strikes were called for by radio. When his first year was over, Emil decided to volunteer for a second tour in Vietnam.

Anti-war protests at home were not well know among his unit at the time and there was no feeling of doubt about their presence or mission in Vietnam.

Emil was honorably discharged in 1971, and returned to the Youngstown area. He has worked in the area of home maintenance, mostly for the Youngstown Metropolitan Housing administration, since his discharge.

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INTERVIEWEE: EMIL J. THOMAS, JR.

INTERVIEWER: John B. Jamieson

SUBJECT: training, combat, jungle area, attitudes

DATE: July 8, 1989

J: This is an interview with Emil Thomas for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Vietnam Combat, by John Jamieson, at 3268 Lewis-Seifert Road in Hubbard, Ohio, on July 8, 1989, at 1:30 in the afternoon.

Give us a little background on where you were born, and where you went to school, and things of that nature; family background.

T: I was born the east side of Youngstown. I didn't go to school there, my family moved. I ended up in Austintown most of my school years and finally on the west side of Youngstown at Chaney, where I graduated.

J: What year did you graduate from Chaney?

T: 1967.

J: What about your father and mother, what did they do?

T: My father worked at McKenzie Muffler making mufflers and die-setter. My mother was a house wife.

J: Brothers and sister?

T: One sister.

J: Is she younger than you?

T: Yes.

J: Right out of high school what was the situation like in terms of the draft and your situation with the draft?

T: Well, I had high numbers. I wasn't going to get drafted right away but I joined because there was nothing happening in town.

J: Right out of high school?

T: Yes.

J: And you joined the Marine Corps?

T: Yes I did.

J: How long after high school did you go in to the Marine Corps?

T: They had a ninety day program where you wait ninety days and settle your affairs in town and get prepared to go and then you leave for boot camp. I went to Cleveland for my physical right away because I joined right away and then was on a delay program.

J: You would have joined like in June and then came in in the fall?

T: Yes, approximately.

J: Tell me a little bit about your training and where you went to boot camp?

T: I went to Parris Island for boot camp. I left out of there a PFC and then I went to Camp Gieger for an infantry training regiment. After that, they sent me--out of the 2500--they sent me to communications school. That was just for Morse code, I was good at that. Then they sent me into crypto school, so I can't tell you no more about that. Right after that they sent me to Camp Lejuene for Recon training, force Recon.

J: How long was boot camp, the original training?

T: I believe it was sixteen weeks.

J: Sixteen weeks?

T: Yes.

J: You went from there to infantry training?

T: Infantry, Camp Gieger and Camp Lejuene.

J: Where is that, Camp Lejuene?

T: Oh geez, North or South Carolina. I can't remember.

J: Now this infantry training, how long did that last?

T: Your basic infantry training was like eight weeks. Then after that you went to your school, whatever your MOS was. I was at 2,500 so that was communications.

J: MOS is like a category?

T: It is a number, a test occupational number, yes.

J: What was a typical day like in infantry training? What time did you get up and what kind of activities did you . . . ?

T: We were up before dawn running and doing our workouts. They already had me pegged for special forces so they put me with a group because I met all those people that I went through that training with. They put us all together and they ran us to death and exercise and death. I never pulled mess duty because of what we were going into.

J: How would you compare with the way that movies and films portray that training and the reality of it? Would you say that it is consistent to movies and reality or would you say there is some differences?

T: There is definitely more reality. It was terrifying at first going into boot camp. I don't think I could shit for a month when I was there. It is one of those things. As far as the training was, in the movies they showed you going through and a guy couldn't make it over a wall and then he finally did make it over the wall because of his efforts and everything. There were some people that just couldn't make it over the wall and they let them go around the wall.

J: How much abuse was given out in the earliest boot camp in infantry training? Did they really abuse you like they show in the movie?

T: At the particular time I went in there was a heavy order out that the drill instructor wasn't allowed to touch the boots. He wasn't allowed to touch them at all. I came in . . . My boot training was the last of the old Marine Corps, where it was a very physical amount of training. A lot of mental stress.

J: How did it change after that? What do you know about the changes that occurred after?

T: Well, I watched other platoons go through the new Marine Corps at that time and I go, "Why didn't I delay another year?" It seemed a lot easier. The physical training was probably the same as what I went through except they didn't have to carry bricks in the pack like I did; climbing things, running and jumping.

J: How long was your typical day, what time did they finally let you go to sleep?

T: Unless the platoon really messed up, after writing letters home, polishing our boots, cleaning everything up, we were in the rack around 9:30, 10:00.

J: And up before dawn?

T: We were up at 5:00, definitely 5:00.

J: After your advanced training in communications, you were in communications?

T: Yes.

J: What was the first real assignment that they handed down to you?

T: Well, my first real assignment . . . This was going into country at the time was country orientation. Where you walked around and got used to the heat.

J: In Vietnam?

T: Vietnam, yes. We didn't do anything state side.

J: You went right from training to . . . ?

T: Well, we did duty for awhile until we got our papers to go. That was in San Diego. They sent us to a bunch of different schools but we basically hung around and just did duty, maintaining the property.

J: Okay, how long from the induction . . . You went in the fall of 1967, how long was the total training until you were in Vietnam?

T: It took two years.

J: You were two years from 1967, about the fall of 1969 you went, got to Vietnam?

T: Right.

J: What was your original tour supposed to be, a twelve month rotation?

T: Yes.

J: Tell me about your first experiences in Vietnam?

T: In Vietnam. I was leaving country without a weapon and all the stories of the guys coming back. We met them in Okinawa because we went there first. We went up to Pendleton for staging. Then we got on the big jet and took over to Okinawa and they set you up with your people you were going to be with. After Okinawa we flew into Vietnam, in Da Nang. They kept us in holding area for about a month. They sent us out to . . . One of the places was like Hill Ten they called it. They ran patrols off this hill so it was like a working situation. We didn't do anything. We did the switch board, operated radios, filled sand bags, just to get used to the heat. Then went to classes on different booby traps that were new, were coming out, new explosives, getting snapped in on the range there, make sure our weapons were functional, that was about it.

J: First of all, what was your outfit there when you first got there? Did you stay with the same group?

T: No, after that they sent me to 1st Battalion 1st Recon. That was outside of Da Nang, on hill ten.

J: That was your original assignment?

T: Yes.

J: 1st Battalion.

T: 1st Recon.

J: What types of weapons did they issue them?

T: .45, M16, some people had shotguns, some people had M79s, grenade launchers.

J: Did everybody have a pistol as well as a . . . ?

T: Yes, a lot of people had their own, they brought with them. They sent for them.

J: No restrictions on that?

T: They had them sent in care packages and stuff like that. Wrapped in tinfoil, hid the shape of it, made everyone think it was cheese or something.

J: They must not have been very . . .

T: They didn't care what came in the country. Nothing came out of country, that was the thing.

J: You mentioned this booby trap training, what kinds of things did they try to caution you against?

T: Well, they built boots with metal plates for the soles, for the pungi sticks. By the time that I got there the pungi sticks were rotting in the field and they were ineffective. So, that wasn't necessary.

J: Describe a pungi stick.

T: A pungi stick is a piece of bamboo that is sharpened and dipped in water buffalo shit for poison, you know so you get infected real fast.

J: How would they disguise it?

T: They weren't disguised, they were in pits in holes, they were on sides of banks where you would slip. It was a slimy bank or they had the elephant grass on the hill where you slide down the hill and fall right into a pit and stab you and you are dead. During the time I was there they rotted. They were in the field that long. It is like putting a stick in the ground that is going to rot, and get soft, and break.

J: The first area you were at was Hill Ten, do you have any idea where about that was in the country?

T: It was about two or three miles outside of Da Nang.

J: That was not a real active area when you were there at first?

T: It was. They didn't get any insurgents, they got a lot of rocket mortar firing at the place.

J: What other types of booby traps did you get schooled in?

T: Tomato cans, there were new ones. Those were anti-personnel mines. Their logic behind that was they didn't want to kill you, they wanted to injure because it took two people to get you off the field. So, that is three people out of the war. Which is very smart, give them credit for that. That had like boards in the ground with nails in it. There were three boards hinged, they were set over a hole and they were camouflaged. You step into that and your foot would go down in a hole and the boards would wrap around your legs. They were particular nice items. We found a lot of those. We found bear traps, just running patrols. Any mortar that they would have they would take the cap off of it, put a nail underneath it and you step on it. We had a lot of duds. What defeated us . . . Well, our

duds that were over there, we don't know if it was the storage, they got damp, the caps, whatever. They had like barrels, you would see in the movies, swinging out of trees with spikes on it. They were there, that is where the movies got that stuff. Some of it has to be real.

J: What was a typical day like if you were on a patrol type thing? How long would you spend in the field and how far would you go?

T: We parachuted in at night. My job was actually forward observer. We would come in at night. We would hang around in trees during the day looking out. Like I worked out in the mountains. We just looked down over the valleys to see if we saw any movement and we would count troop forces. We would call in artillery if we had any idea for deuce.

J: Did you share your radio for that purpose?

T: Yes, we had a decipher unit. That is what the crypto was for because it was code that changed every four hours.

J: I heard that guys that were carrying radios were a prime target for the enemy. Was that ever a consideration?

T: That never bothered us, that was for the long antennas; the long range. They had tape antennas that bent down. Every thing was m-nude, there was nothing that flashed. That is a coating that went over anything that is shiny.

J: Like a flat coating?

T: Yes, it is very flat; flat paint. I carried a lot of that because my dog tags, like on my boots . . . I took one on my boots in case one of them blew off there was one there. One around my neck but they would wear and I would m-nude them at night and keep the flashing down.

J: How often did you make contact with enemy forces in that area?

T: We weren't supposed to make contact. I saw, everyday, enemy forces. We were caught a couple of times and we got a sky look-out, a sky lighter; to get a raid. We had a few casualties. In the mountains there were catacombs. We would a lot of animal catches, a lot of stuff.

J: Was that in the Ho Chi Minh trail?

T: No, no, I really couldn't tell you where that is at. They flew us there and we were dropped off. They gave us a general map but with no names of countries, just names of villages that were close by.

J: How long was a parachute airborne training? You didn't mention that in your training.

T: Oh, well that was real fast. Marine Corps didn't have a jump school at the time. They sent us to Benning some times and I can't remember the other place we went to. We were already in shape, there was no doubt about it. They just taught us how to land and that lasted for about maybe four weeks before first jump. Our first jump was in Okinawa.

J: Tell me about your first jump, was that an experience?

T: Well, that was real easy. I went right out of the plane, no problem.

J: No pushing?

T: No, the second jump they pushed. Definitely had to push me the second one because I didn't have no feeling of free fall. Never fell off anything when I was a kid that far.

J: The first jump did they have you on a static line?

T: Yes. Well, every jump we had was on static line. I never did a free fall.

J: How long were you at that area, at the Da Nang area, until they moved you? Did you move?

T: That was basically about a month.

J: Then, where did you go from there?

T: We were outside of Da Nang to the Recon area where they pick out patrols and killer teams and stuff like that; forward observer and killer team. Basically that is all we ran, it is not like . . . Sometimes they had secret missions but these were the guys, they were Seals and Recon and everything about them, they were really the special people that were hard as nails. So, they went out and rescued people from mansions or whatever; like you see in the movies. I ran your basic like 8:00 to 5:00 job. This is my job, we stayed out over night of course. We had to, at least, run to a clearing to get picked up.

J: How many helicopter rides did you take while you were over there?

T: Oh, I can't number them.

J: 100, 200?

T: That is pretty close. I had one at least every other day.

J: How long were you on duty in terms of consecutive days and then what was the off time?

T: It all depends. We'd go out for a month . . .

J: . . . Spend a month in the field?

T: Yes, and then we would . . . We would go out to headquarters company that is out in the field and then we would work with them. Like, I would go out with Delta Company and I would work with them. We were TAD to all these different companies, Charlie Company and stuff like that. We worked out of the headquarters company most of the time. The CO says, "This is what I need. I want information on this." Then they would pick us up and drop us in, where ever we needed.

J: TAT is that . . . ?

T: TAD, temporary assigned duty.

J: What did you spend, twelve months, in Vietnam?

T: No, I stayed there for two years. I signed up . . . I met a bunch of nice people that they would have been lost without me. They made me platoon sergeant for a killer team, which was exciting.

J: So, you spent the whole two years at that one base, basically outside of Da Nang?

T: I showed up at that one base and they threw us every place else after that. My home base was there. Every time a mission was over, or an operation was over, we came back to that base and then we went to China Beach; in country R&R for three days. Just to let loose.

J: What was that base like? Can you describe that, how big it was and what was the defense?

T: The Recon base?

J: Yes.

T: It was a very proud base, let me put it that way. All painted up, it was like they intentionally put a target on to see how much we could take because we got a lot of rockets. They put bull's-eyes on the roof. We had

our sign, "Switch silent and deadly," our motto, all over the place. Some people had playing cards, just like in the movies. I never carried that around, that was extra weight.

J: Playing cards to mark bodies?

T: Yes, your unit. I played cards with it. Cards were heavy then.

J: What was the food and other amenities like?

T: Well they fed us good. We had lurfs when we went out in the field but when we were in rear they fed us top shelf stuff. If we starting getting late we had to workout a little harder, that is were we did all of our road work, running, and staying in shape. We had our own confidence course over there.

J: You mentions lurfs, what would that be?

T: Long range food item, it is all dehydrated stuff. You add water to it because we couldn't carry cans.

J: Were they C-ration type thing?

T: No, no, like chicken al a king, or spaghetti and meatballs, or something like that. You boiled water in your canteen cup and you use a heat tab. Then you pour it in, stir it up, and you have a hot meal. That is when you are out in the bush, they were good.

J: Why wouldn't you carry cans?

T: They would rattle, they are too heavy, and for the type of work that we did we had to move. Like our motto says, "Switch silent and deadly." We can't afford to make noise because we are out five men, we are out there by ourselves. There is no one around. We can call in air strikes, artillery, ship fire. By the time they got to us there would be a couple of gooks that got to us first. It is important to stay very quiet.

J: Okay, when you were on patrol what was the feeling in terms of awareness? Were you constantly looking for guys?

T: Oh definitely.

J: Describe the attitude that you remember?

T: I was with a very professional team. We had our own sign language. When we were on patrol we very seldom talked, you would get noticed if you did. No one was afraid, or they didn't show it. I think everyone was

afraid but, like I said, they didn't show it. We were just to damn busy to be afraid because we had a lot to do. On a killer team it was easy. We would just sweep through an area where civilians were evacuated. Anything that moved died, that was all there was to it. We mortared the area real bad, air strikes real bad, we walked through and tried to count bodies to see if it was worthwhile. When we were out Reconing we weren't supposed to be in the shit at all. We were just supposed to be quiet, sit there, all painted up in the shadows and just counting troop movements and radio back.

J: You try to get high ground for that?

T: Always. A lot of times if we had low ground, we had listening posts we set up. Where we had our little box that you could hear a tiger walk by. It would pick up everything. People on duty, we used to have two guys in a listening box. The listening patrol that would just sit there, they would hardly breath, just to feel the ground shake. We would know if they had tanks, we would know if they were on foot and how big they were, or how many troops they were. Then, we radioed back. First of all we weren't supposed to get caught, we weren't supposed to be seen at all. They don't know we are there, we are fine. That is the way it was.

J: Any times come close to getting caught or ambushed?

T: Oh yes. We were Charlie Company, this is a war story here. We were Charlie Company and the Seabees came down and dug us out an area. They made a berm so they couldn't get direct fire into the headquarters camp. So, we were at the headquarters camp but I didn't want to hang around. These guys were just too noisy, too loud. I needed rest. So, me and this other dude went on the other side of the berm. We laid there, we fell asleep and woke up and these guys were gone. They didn't even know we were there. Charlie was coming into the area and we had to call in a line of artillery to come in to give us a wall until we ran the direction. We found out where they were, they popped a flare, we ran right for it but they had to put artillery between us. There was a few times shrapnel came in front of my face. You could hear it going by but never caught us.

J: Any of your close friends get wounded?

T: Oh yes, I had about seven of them blown away. They came into our outfit, they were like brand new. It is like the story says, it doesn't matter, he hasn't served any time. His life isn't worth nothing when he first comes in the country. Once your days are short,

you are a short timer, your life is worth more because you are going to leave very soon.

J: You see often in movies or other portrayals of Vietnam that the survival of the first guy, or the first time you get there, the survival rate is real slim. Then the longer you are there your chances of making it are better because of the experience or something like that.

T: No. It all depends on what is going on and how Charlie feels about you. I imagine he could have overran . . . Charlie is crazy. Only a few times they would wrap bandular torpedoes around them and jumped in the water to blow it up. I never saw that too often, although I was out in the boon docks more than in a base camp. So, I couldn't tell you what it is like in a base . . . I was in a base camp a couple of times. We had condition orange, or whatever that is, to be on the alert. We went to red one time. Nothing happened and then we just went right back out into the bush.

J: What was the attitude about the war and the attitude about the leadership there? Tell me a little bit about . . .

T: Few guys . . . Leadership, few guys we respected. I made sergeant over there, it was like a field thing. I did a few things that look good I imagine. We had this guy named Lieutenant Trip and that was his real name, ain't that the truth there. That is his real name. This guy was a clown. He was a boot brown bar, just got overseas. He was going to be in charge of our company. He came out with us, it was basically a training patrol we went on. Get him used to in country. He picks up a .90 millimeter cannon round, he goes, "Look how big this bullet is and hold it," and everyone scatters. Yes, those things explode. They are grenades. That is why they are so affective and you can imagine a .90 millimeter cannon shooting rounds at you; how many thousands per second coming at you. They are all mini grenades. Once they hit, they explode, so they get more people. It was like stepping on a Bouncing Betty. It blows out of the ground, gets that person, and then it just goes about five, six feet up in the air, blows up. That was it gets a multitude of people. They were great mines, good mines.

J: Okay, you were there from 1969, 1970, 1971?

T: Yes.

J: What was the feeling about the anti-war movement that was really starting about that time back in America?

T: I was too busy, to tell you the truth, to know about it. One thing I knew about it because close to home was Kent. At that particular time what I wanted to do was show up at any Army right after I left Vietnam and shove a rifle off of any of the weekend warrior's butt and blow it off. That is the way I felt. I still feel that sometimes. Sometimes I just think about it when they bring up the birthdays of the memories of the people that died protesting.

J: Do you think that they censored the news of anti-war protests over there? Did they make an effort to not let people find out about what was going on about Kent?

T: To us they did, except for Kent. Most of the information that we got came in letters. A bunch of guys were hippies, that I met. They were very good soldiers though. They were realistic soldiers, that is how I liked the hippies. They are amazing. It was peace, and love but I'm going to get you before you get me. You want to live, everyone wants to live, and if someone is aiming a gun at you, you want to shoot them. All the information that ever came to us was through letters. The AFVN in Da Nang, the radio station. They played some good music but we didn't hear the new stuff. The first time I ever heard Led Zepplin was a guy came over and he brought the tape over. "A Whole Lot of Loving," the first song that ever came out for Zepplin that really made the . . . I thought it was a girl, I didn't know who was singing that.

J: Did you get "Stars and Stripes" over there?

T: We never seen that. We couldn't even see a Bob Hope Show.

J: Really.

T: Yes. They picked out fifty guys to go see the show out of the whole platoon that I was TAD too. We had to hump in three clicks to go see the show because we were just running around outside of Hill Ten and where they have the show there was a beer garden there, a booby house. It was in the rear, it was pretty well secured because we were running patrols out on our days off. That is what we do for our days off. We went in there, one guy stepped on a mine coming in, we humped all of his weapons in. By the time we got to the gate this PFC in starched camouflaged outfit standing there said, "You guys can't come in there. Look at you. You need a shower, you need cleaned, your clothes are torn." I said, "Hey, we just came back in the bush, man. They picked fifty of us to come in because everything is pretty well secured." We all walked in single file. They refused. Needless to say he got blown away.

J: How did that happen?

T: This black dude just . . . It was his buddy that got blown up, stepped on a mine coming in to see the show. He just riddled his body, riddled it.

J: What about the leadership? I want to come back to that. Did you have a feeling that they were competent generally or was there any disrespect or even failure to obey orders when you thought the orders weren't the right orders?

T: I had a CO that was like Mike Tyson. You put handcuffs on Mike Tyson, you are going to kick his butt. Let me put it that way, they were handcuffed, every one of them. We lacked a motive when we went out in the field. I am talking about being TAD to the companies that I was TAD. When I was with my regular outfit there, if we went in as force Recon and swept an area we were fully armed and they gave our heads. It was nice because we were special forces. They trusted our instinct; not kill civilians and stuff like that but you didn't know who the civilians were. We just went through and swept a village, that was it. It was known . . . Part of the rice was missing real fast and we know once the rice is going that fast, when they have a good harvest--which they did the particular year I was in--then they are feeding the VC. So, these people have become the enemy also. You wipe them out, you get rid of the people.

J: I'm sure you are aware of Lieutenant Calley and the My Lai Massacre. How much activity of that nature did you see? Was there a lot of innocents killed out of frustration?

T: I didn't see innocents killed. I saw abuse, like some of the guys pretending to be boxy, which is doctor in Vietnam. They had a little red cross on their helmet when they went through. A guy had a bad rash on his back so the guy said, "I'll fix you up number one," and put bug spray on him.

J: Just to torture him?

T: Just to torture him, you know. Old Papa San. As far as . . . I have seen mutilation, I've seen the guys that collect ears. Most of the guys who collected ears were MVN regulars, they took them off of that had uniforms; that were the soldier.

J: Well, tell me a little bit about that ear collecting?

T: It was just a macho thing, I didn't get into it. I couldn't think of it. Seeing a body lay on the side of

the road and the pig eating the guy's skull open. It was enough for me. I have shot a couple of people that I knew that I almost faced. I never really faced them because I called in air strikes. I never had to really be in the shit like everybody else. It worked out for me. I had like two confirms, two years I was there. Then I could have had 7,000 confirms after that, I mean from air strikes that I called in, artillery, whatever.

J: When you say confirmed, was that somebody that you know that you shot? You see the body.

T: They know it was my bullet, and how they knew that I'll never know. There could be simultaneous bullets going into this guy and two guys will jump up and say, "I got that bastard." You never really know and you don't want to know. As far as being shot face to face, I just surprised the guy. He was just sitting there and he reached for his weapon and "sing loid".

J: What does that mean?

T: Sorry about that. That was the scary part of those, being surprised. There were surprises every day.

J: When you walked around with a weapon did you have a round in the chamber ready to go?

T: Oh yes, even when I went on base. They had us cleared at the gates and I put it right back in, safety on. The .45 was always half cocked but the round was in. What am I doing there for? They ever found out, I would have been court-martialed. They would have court-martialed me when I was back in the States. That is good because I was back in the States.

J: How much of a feeling of people missing the States and wanted to get back to America? How common was that feeling?

T: Oh, it was very common when we came back to the rear and everyone had their little stereos or tape decks and got tapes from home. That is when it hit you hard. Well, it is like being around your wife too much also and she is driving you nuts and you got to go someplace. That was another thing too. Everyone hated the mess sergeant because he always turned people in or stealing their bottles of Jim Beam that they we used to trade for cigarettes for us, stuff like that. Most of the other soldiers who did smoke or didn't drink, tried to get the ration cards for that.

J: What was the ration situation on cigarettes and liquor?

T: I didn't smoke then. As far as the booze went, I was

lucky to drink maybe once every three months. We came in the rear, they gave us like two warm beers. Unless we accidentally came on a Green Baret Platoon or Company while we were out. They set up camp and they really treat their guys good. As far as the Marine Corps you have to be officer of high standings, in Special Forces, to get all the benefits that you would normally get. Like an Army sergeant would get a lot more than a Marine lieutenant for that matter.

J: What was the attitude in the Marines, or at least in your outfit, towards the other services; the Air Force and the Army? Was there a feeling that they were missing the harder action?

T: No, everyone had nicknames for them, millions of them.

J: What?

T: Your basic ones "anker clanker," "dog face." Seabees, I never had any nicknames for them. We appreciated a lot of work that they did.

J: They were Navy engineers?

T: Yes, they were damn good too. I've never seen anything built so fast that we needed or a berm made so fast with their bulldozers when we really needed it. We are getting incoming fire and this guy is sitting on top of a bulldozer making a berm so it protects our butts.

J: Was there a feeling that you guys were doing the toughest job and that everybody else there had an easier job?

T: Well, we didn't like the people in dispersing, or the guy who ran the movie house, or the beer garden, back in rear. Those are guys we didn't like. Especially the PFC advanced corporal who got his butt blown away telling us not to see a Bob Hope show when we just came in from the bush looking nasty-- twenty, thirty day growths on our faces--because we weren't clean enough. Those are the people we didn't really like. As far as everyone . . . Guys out in the ships, they had their jobs. We talked about them, made fun. We used to get fans and try to get air conditioners for when we went back in the rear. We air conditioned an ammo bunker that we used to . . . We made for our own hooch to stay in. We traded AKA .47s for these air conditioners these guys had. It was unique because they couldn't get it out of the country and we got their air conditioner. Then, when we rotated we sold it or traded it off if anyone had greenbacks, just to bring back with us.

J: How much was the black market . . . How much did you see of that?

T: When I there it was all around you. As far as exchanging greenbacks or MPZ for greenbacks and whatever, and vica versa, it wasn't . . . It used to be fifty percent. You would make fifty percent on the deal. By the time I got there it was like ten percent. No one wanted to take the risk of giving away America's money for another ten percent.

J: What about the drug abuse? We hear a lot about Vietnam Veterans having heroin problems and things like that. Was that a common thing among the combat units?

T: In grunt outfits it was. My unit, no. The most my unit did was smoke pot when we came in the rear. There was a bad situation about speed, obiezethal it was called. That was bad news. I have taken that on patrols and I was the most intense person in the world.

J: Just to stay awake?

T: Yes, well you stayed awake, there was no doubt. You are supposed to take like on the bottle . . . You could read the bottle but it was interpreted by Zarban--take one teaspoon every other day. What that one teaspoon did was keep you up until that other day. We had . . .

J: Was that issued by the Army or Marines?

T: No, gooks had it. This was for the fat gooks. That is why you don't see too many of this stuff. It really, really worked. It kept you up. It was like a syrup in a bottle and it kept you up. Guys were drinking half bottles and staying up for five, six days in a row out on patrol. Then they were afraid to go out on patrol because they were afraid they were going to crash out there. So, they would take a couple bottles with them just to get back and hope they didn't have to go out until they slept for forty-eight hours at least. As far as special forces units, these guys were that alert, they were so intense in it that they loved the speed rush that they were getting off of it. It really made them do the job.

J: What about just the natural adrenaline of being out in that situation?

T: That wore off after a couple months in the country. It was there, the excitement. After awhile it was a camping trip for me. I would get my poncho liner and poncho, roll up in it where ever I was and go to sleep. We couldn't build fires if we were on a mission. Everyone was . . . None of us smoked so we didn't have

any worry about the little flame. The adrenaline over there was intact, then it became a job.

J: Did you ever worry about losing an edge that might give you some disadvantage?

T: No, that edge came right back when someone stepped on a tail piper.

J: How long of an effect would that have on you?

T: Oh, about a month. Watch where you walk, look for mines, look for a swept area because something was planted there.

J: We never walked on the trails anyhow. We made our own trails. Then, those areas got wired. When they dropped agent orange in a lot of areas all the foliage was gone. We walked through the areas and so did the gooks. That is when they put their wires up with grenades on them. They planted an area. You know, you couldn't imagine and it was off the regular trail. All the gooks knew where there was and it is probably still there too. Our guys hadn't walked through there and blown them all up. Now, agent orange worked for so long and then everything grew back thick. You never see that wire. You would have to crawl on your belly and cut with scissors all the grass and bushes and then hope you run up on a wire and see it. By that time it was rusted, it was blended in, and it was amazing.

J: Where would these wires be held, ankle high?

T: Oh, six inches off the ground to chest high, it didn't matter. It all depends on if it was an elephant grass area or in a rocky area where it is always dark or there is a lot of humidity near caves where you can't see it because it is like steam coming out of the caves. It is a hundred percent humidity.

J: What were the weather conditions? You get the feeling that it was always hot there, is that pretty accurate?

T: Oh yes. You froze at eighty degrees though. You'd get the chills, that is when everyone got sick during monsoon season and it was eighty degrees out. You had a lot of sick people because of the dampness, a lot of jungle rot during that time. I got jungle rot, I still got scars from it on the top of my foot.

J: Describe that.

T: Jungle rot, it was just . . . You get a sore and it would never heal. It would just open up and just get worse and your foot would swell up.

J: You mentioned jungle rot and monsoons, why don't you tell us a little bit about the conditions during the monsoon season?

T: During monsoon . . . Let me tell you before that. We had light duty one time, bridge duty, as a Kaldo bridge on Highway 1.

J: What is Kaldo?

T: It is the name of the bridge. It was just a one lane bridge where we had to stop traffic on one side and let it through. It started to let through again. What we used to do was shoot down river at anything that floated toward the bridge. That was like light duty for guys that were sick. They would just sit on the bridge. If a log came down they would shoot at it because it could be mined to try and blow up that bridge. That was a main life source in that country. During that time, that water, in monsoon season . . . It rained so much that all the bunkers that were down on the land underneath the bridge and stuff like that were in ten feet of water. I got pictures of us sitting in the bunker. You could only see the tops of the bags. We had to continue making bags and filling that bunker up so we could stay there and watch for anybody trying to blow the bridge up. Well, a lot of those guys sitting in that water all the time. Maybe they were shot or caught a little shrapnel, just little pieces from a grenade, and the sores wouldn't heal. It was like a rattlesnake bite, don't heal for a long time. All the moisture, humidity, wetness and everything that happened around there, it never heals and it just starts rotting, it gets infected. You have to put a lot of medication on it because it just washes right off. You don't have time to sit in sick bay for that to heal up. It just gets out of hand, just from generally sweating. Your sweat glands infect.

J: What were the chances of getting out of duty for something minor like that? Were they real strict about going to sick bay?

T: It depended what you did, what your job duties were. There were a lot of guys to try to get back home shot themselves in the foot, you know, to get back home. They didn't get home. That will heal up real fast. They were put on bunker watch or on compounds, radio watch. Were they had to sit up half the night or they had like . . . We basically had four hours, some were two hour tours; radio watch. You had to hold your sign up. We had to stay tight and keep ourselves together.

J: What would they do if they knew it was a self-inflicted

wound?

T: You would get court-martialed; destroying government property.

J: Your foot.

T: That is government property, you are owned by those people. Sun burns, you get a sun burn, that is government property you are destroying.

J: How often was your R & R opportunities?

T: I went on two R & R's. I went two tours but I could have gone on another one. If they didn't need me in my particular MOS at that time, and if there was an opening, I could sign up for it. There were people went on R & R three or four times if they had the money to go. They saved their money to go.

J: Where did you go?

T: I went to Australia two times.

J: Sydney or what city?

T: I flew into Sydney and I went north to Brisbane on a commuter. Then we went to Surfer's Paradise it was called, on the Gold Coast. It was a nice place, a lot of white sand. The place is so clean it is unreal.

J: What were the people like there when you were in Australia?

T: In Sydney they didn't like military, they have had their fills. Even from there own guys. When their own ships came into port it was out of hand. They had bars that were off limits. I imagine like any other ports. One was called The Down Under, only because they had had a . . . People used drugs in this place. So, we weren't allowed. They know that long before we got there, most people's bodies in Vietnam were inflicted with drugs. I'm no expert on it but I bet you any money seventy-five percent of the people tried something or other while they were over there. I don't know if it was from being away from home or was it a new deal. Some people felt they were going to die, "so what I'm going to do it." We weren't allowed to go to those places in Australia. So, I didn't want the big city. I'm not from a real big city, so we found out . . . The first time I went there we got a hotel and then we went around the area; laid on the beach, went to dance halls, there were really strange taverns that were really strange. People liked us, we are still Yanks no matter what happens. The second time I

went with a family program where a family took you in and you stayed with them. It was real nice. I met a lot of people. I went more places too because they wanted to show me their town and this guy was well to do. They pulled my name out of the hat, it is like a lottery situation. He was well to do and I learned how to water ski for the first time.

J: I heard they were a real friendly group of people, was that . . . ?

T: Oh yes, they would go out of their way. I mean really out of their way. This one guy started talking to me. He was talking to his wife but he was talking to me and I wasn't even really paying attention to him and they went, "Did you hear me?" With the English language, that broken English whatever it was. I said, "You talking to me?" He goes, "Yes." I said, "Why don't you speak English. I didn't understand a thing you said." They slowed down for that. They thought it was pretty funny. They took me every where. They showed me off to their relatives. They showed me off, "We got a Yank from the States. He is in Vietnam fighting. He has come over here for seven days."

J: Okay, as you got closer to the end of your first tour when did you make the decision to do a second?

T: It was like my orders already came in and I happened to be in the office and I told the clerk to send them back. When your orders come in you got to go. That is all there is to it. Unless, you are really a special person; a son of Congressman or something like that, you could arrange something.

J: So, your orders to rotate came in and you refused?

T: Well no, I told the clerk in the office, "How about sending them someplace else," because by the time they get back to me . . . I had to have so many days before I could sign up for another tour and by this time I realized how close I was to the guys that were there. I copped an attitude, why have someone new take my place that don't know what the hell is going on. I have been here for a year already. I got that gung ho attitude that, you know, I think everyone caught over there unless they were just slimeballs that didn't appreciate what they were doing for guys in country, etc.

J: You were really there towards the end of the conflict but as the thing got closer to the end was there more of a feeling of just doing the time? Maybe not at your time but was there more of a feeling of just covering themselves, and doing their time to getting out, and

not really worrying about their duty, or the purpose of being there?

T: Well, the patrols got less and less. It was like we were just maintaining a housing authority; fixing our hooches, doing work around the base, just pulling duty. That got pretty boring. I started volunteering for everything that was outside the base where I would go on patrol or something like that. I volunteered when I first went into country because I was so pumped up from drill instructor telling me all this stuff. Then my father was in the service in the Pacific. He made me gung ho that I was volunteered for point and I didn't have to because I was a platoon sergeant.

J: Was your dad a Marine?

T: No, he was in the Navy. So, I joined the Marine Corps just to irk him I think.

J: Was he in World War II then?

T: Yes, he was out in the Pacific.

J: When you rotated back to America where was your first station?

T: Camp Pendleton. I stayed there for a month. Two months actually for debriefing.

J: How intense was the debriefing?

T: That was pretty intense, it was amazing. I wasn't allowed off base. I had to stay in groups of people for awhile. What happened, they had like their spies that were in the groups. We thought these guys just came back and they just wanted to know if we were talk about when we came back. So, they walked us around and we went to the movies. No duty, we didn't have to do a damn thing because everyone that was ready to go someplace did all that stuff. They worked them to death. Then we would go in and see a shrink in a group, in a mass. My whole killer team came back with me and we vowed to keep in touch and stuff like that. We never did. I don't know where these guys are. They asked us questions, "Where were you?" Then I said, "Well, I was at Pleiku a couple time. I went down to Bien Hoa, the big Army Base down there." That place is massive, it was unreal. It was like its own city. "I was up at DMZ. I was in the Mountains, I was at Dodge City, to name a few place." Then the guy goes, "No, you weren't." "Yes I was, why would they call it that if I wasn't there." I'm arguing and then he says, "Well okay, this is the whole thing, you weren't really there because we didn't actually tell you you were there."

The were trying to brainwash us again, like trying to tell us we weren't in Vietnam or we weren't at Pleiku. We weren't on bordering countries. We weren't there but I have had a few long plane rides before we jumped and they were way out of the way a few time.

J: You suspect you were in Laos or Cambodia?

T: I'm not sure.

J: They wouldn't tell you that?

T: No, they didn't tell us anything. We had a job to do and we did it. That is all there is to it. Our maps were cut down where before they would laminate the maps for us they would put all the grids on it. They would locate the maps for us, put north, south on it, but we didn't get the whole maps of the area. Some of the names of the cities were blotted out, like they were mimeographed maps. They put numbers. "Okay, I want you to go to fifty-three, it is three clicks over this river." The rivers weren't named. When we went to small villages we heard names but I didn't speak Vietnamese. We had an interpreter, I think it was S2 the interpreters came out of or something like that. Maybe that is intelligence. It is hard to remember some of that stuff because they blocked most of it out, or tried to.

J: When you made it back to the states did it strike you as different from what you anticipated the attitude being here? Was there some disappointment that you were not welcome home like heroes from World War II or earlier wars?

T: When I came home my mother had a party for me at a local tavern, the Bonanza Bar on the west side. Everyone, "Yes, alright," you know everyone was crazy. I remember this one guy sitting in there with real long hair. He was just sitting there drinking a beer, not saying anything to everyone. All of a sudden this old timer goes up, "Look at this guy, he did something for his country," and started getting on this guys case. I put a fist through the old guys face real fast. All of a sudden a fight broke out, it just got crazy. That was basically my welcome home right off the bat. A guy picking on a guy with long hair because he wants to wear long hair. I think I was . . . Because the one guy in platoon he lives in Warren, I called him hippie. He was with my group. I can't remember his name now. It is beyond me, I just called him hippie. He showed me pictures of him and he was outrageous but he lived in Warren. We had a lot to talk about. So, I sympathize for them, you know, when I see that kid.

J: Was that a general feeling among you guys coming back? Did you resent people that didn't go?

T: Well, the younger generation . . . They go, "What are you a bad ass Marine or something?" I still had a bald head at the time, high and tight. I got stuff from the younger kids which I still felt I was still young. I didn't realize that I became an old man right away. It didn't sink in right away and then all of a sudden everyone is approaching me, "You look like a man of responsibility now." It was the way I was carrying myself and stuff like that. I was split, like the generation below me and the generation above me but I was in limbo right here at my age. Maybe it was because of when I was born, et cetera.

J: How old were you when you got back?

T: Twenty-two, around there. That is pretty close.

J: Do you stay in the Marines after you rotated back?

T: Yes, I had to go to Cherry Point, North Carolina. They put me in a MP Company out there for awhile. Then I applied for an early out because of too many people knew the MOS you were allowed to leave. It wasn't that early but it was better than going to brig because I locked myself in a plane tower. I had duty up there as guard. These guys said just watch the radar screens. You see any bleeps, press this button, and I'll come in. I'll put my coffee down and come in. I was sitting there . . . I was real homesick at the time. I was upset from coming home on leave. I did remember that, I was real upset because it was just turmoil; the riots in Youngstown, I wasn't allowed to walk the streets. I thought I fought and had permission to walk the streets if I wanted to. If I'm not causing trouble, breaking the laws, but I didn't have that right. I even got into it with the MPs. I came home . . . Well, they got me out of there and I had to see a shrink then. There was really nothing wrong mentally with me. I rotated out and it was just one job after another. Work was good right off the bat and then the plants started folding.

J: What kind of support did they give you in terms of psychological support and coming back and trying to help you adjust?

T: I got your basic pat on the back. You are okay, you know what you did. We don't want you to remember but we know what you did. I got a lot of support from family and then I ran up on a lot of conversation behind the back, behind their back. They were talking in another room going, "That poor boy," stuff like

this. I'm going, "What poor? What is going on? I don't know what is going on here?" That blew my mind completely. I didn't know what to think was going on. So, I got jobs and I worked. I just kept working.

J: Did you ever have any recurring feelings about some of the things that you saw and did where it bothered you?

T: No, I remember every good time I have had over there. They were few and far between, aside from business. The bottom line (the new yuppie word for the day), we had our bottom lines, we went out and did our work. It wasn't nothing to be proud of, blowing away someone, or spying on them. It just seems kind of flaky to me but when we came back in the rear we had our few beers, smoked a joint when we knew we didn't have duty until the next day, and hung around. Some guys played the guitar. We sang or we went to China Beach. I went to Australia on R&R. I remember the good times. I don't know if I was brainwashed out of the bad times of what I have done and where I was. I was. I remember a lot but some things are just real fuzzy. Like I was hypnotized. I know it is there but I just can't tell you.

J: Do you think that was sort of a self preservation type thing that you would forget the bad things?

T: No one wants to remember bad things. The only time you would remember bad things was if they got you in trouble. You would remember that so you wouldn't do it again. As far as a conflict, going to conflict, that is something else. That is just a job you did for your government.

J: Okay, I have two questions that are sort of post war. One question, how do you think it changed you? Did it have an effect on you? I'm sure it did but how would you sum up the effect that the war had on you as a man.

T: Well, I am still a little boy. I still camp. I still pull night Recons when I go out camping. If we go rafting, things like this, I feel like I am the leader of that boat, or that raft. I will take over if something is happening. Even if it is medical or someone gets injured and you need something to have done right away, I will go do it right now. If I have to go up a ladder and I know I am afraid of climbing a ladder because the thing flexes too damn much, I will go up that ladder anyhow. I will hold my breath and go up.

J: Do you think it gave you basically a sense of confidence?

T: I feel more confident in myself and then I don't. It all depends. I have been put down a lot since I came

back. I sort of backed out of the confidence. I got boldness now, making up for confidence that I should have. I will do it anyhow just to prove that I'm going to do it. There is no barrier I can't go through because of boldness not confidence.

J: I have another question that is sort of summing up the whole thing. How do you feel about the failure, or at least what everybody says is a failure, of the United States in that conflict? Do you feel that your efforts and all the lives and all that money and everything . . . Was that a waste in your mind or do you look at that as just one of those things?

T: It is really difficult winning the war the way we did.

J: Winning the war?

T: Yes, we won the war. I think we won the war. We lost lives, that is the sad part, but it is like the guys in World War II. They liberated France, those people . . . Parties something terrible, like the movies show. Even on the news reels, stuff like that, it shows people out in the street dancing it. Americans liberated them. We had a tremendous language barrier over there or the gooks would have felt the same way to us during the time.

J: Just the fact that it is now communist and the whole effort was to keep Vietnam from being communist. It is now a communist country and Saigon is Ho Chi Minh's city. Do you feel bad that they didn't succeed. Who do you blame?

T: We weren't persistent enough. That is the only reason we were put in a position. As far as the battles we came in, we won those. We won those battles but it was a tremendous cost. All we had to do was as soon as we came in the countries, open up a 7-11 store and a gas station and a church on every corner of that country and communism couldn't have been in there because too many people would have been working. They would have loved \$1.35 an hour that they were getting. If we commercialized that place right away as soon as we got in there communism couldn't have gone in there because they don't like the capitalist part of us. That is all we had to do. Open a 7-11 store.

J: So you think the strategy was all wrong?

T: Yes. We do like the Palestinians are doing to raise money for their country. They opened up an Arab store and then a portion of their profit goes back to Palestine to buy weapons, et cetera. Oh, you bleed the

country out of profit. You walk in there . . . You don't go in there with guns. You go in there with shopping carts and bright lit stores that say something. Instant rice, they would love it. That is all you had to do, go in there and turn the people around that way. If we went in there and built factories instead of building bunkers with all the money that was spent with that. Put people to work and give them a pay check, like \$2 an hour, they would go nuts. I'm sure they have that in the north. It is like the north here and the south in this country. The south is lazier because of the heat and it is the same way there. They could have walked into the south, brought their farm equipment in do the tremendous propaganda deal that the Russians did when they brought Communism in but they did it a ruthless way. All they had to do was bring in 7-11's, stores like that or whatever. Bring in churches, bring in missionaries, and stuff like that and retrain the people. We went in with guns. They were more afraid of us because our troops were nasty toward the civilians. Why would they give a shit about us? They made money off the black market. Also, the north made money off of us too because they passed that money up north and bought more weapons. Everything wasn't just handed by Russia or Communist China. It wasn't handed to them. It is all a political deal but it could have been through business. We could have waltzed right into that country. One Arab showed up in Youngstown, look at all the stores that are there now. I am half Arab but I still say that. They just waltzed right in. That is perfect, now you have a take over. You have the confidence of the people now. You give them something they never had in their life. We went to Da Nang, they wanted us to see the culture. This is was on one of our days off. They showed us a bunch of churches and other things for churches over there. Then, we saw a record and tapes store. They sold cassette tapes of Steve Winwood, "Back in Time", and Cream and they were \$35 for a cassette. We could have waltzed in that country and knocked the prices down, made people happy. That is the way they should have done that conflict and I say that word loosely.

J: I think that is about all I wanted to ask you but it went well.

END OF INTERVIEW