

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam War

Personal Experience

O. H. 1481

THOMAS J. LOWRY

Interviewed

by

Darlene Pavlock

on

November 1, 1991

THOMAS J. LOWRY

Thomas Lowry was born March 7, 1948, in Youngstown, Ohio to Thomas H. and Dorothy M. Lowry. The oldest of ten children, five brothers and four sisters, he has lived in the Youngstown area all his life. He now resides in Boardman Township with his wife, Mary and two children, Maureen Terese and John Edward, twelve and six respectively. With the exception of family trips to Lake Erie and the Meadville, Pennsylvania area, Tom and his family did little traveling during his growing-up years.

He enlisted in the U.S. Air Force in March of 1966, prior to graduation from Cardinal Mooney High School. He entered the service in July, doing both basic and advanced training at Amarillo A.F.B., Texas. His classification was Inventory Management Specialist and he was not assigned to a particular unit. His first year and a half assignment was at Travis A.F.B. near San Francisco, California. He then volunteered for a year's duty in Vietnam, receiving his orders on Valentine's day, 1968. His non-combat duty included six months in Saigon where he checked incoming inventory against reports, then six months in Da Nang where he was responsible for the flight schedule of fighter planes. He rotated out of Vietnam a month early because of a quota. There were too many Air Force personnel in country, therefore, Tom was rifted. Upon return, he was stationed in Laredo, Texas for his remaining year as a supply officer in the Jet Engine Shop.

After discharge in July, 1970, Tom returned to his hometown and entered Youngstown State University, graduating in March 1975 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English.

Tom is presently Collections Manager for the Home Savings and Loan Company of Youngstown, Ohio. He is on the advisory board of Consumer Credit Counseling Service and his interests include aerobics, golf and reading.

-Darlene Pavlock

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Vietnam War

INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS J. LOWRY
INTERVIEWER: Darlene Pavlock
SUBJECT: Growing-up years, family travel, entering
the service, Vietnam duty, attitudes
DATE: November 1, 1991

P: This is an interview with Thomas J. Lowry, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Vietnam War, by Darlene Pavlock, at 275 Federal Plaza West, Youngstown, Ohio, on November 1, 1991, at 2:30 p.m.

The first question I'd like to ask you, Tom, is where you were born and where you were raised?

L: I was born and raised in Youngstown, Ohio. I was born at Northside Hospital in 1948 and other than the four years I spent in the Air Force, I've lived my whole life here.

P: Have you really?

L: Yes.

P: . . . your whole life in this area?

L: Yes.

P: On what side of town?

L: All over. We bounced between the Northside and the Southside. I spent the first two or three years of my

life on Idora Avenue on the Southside, then we moved to Bryson Street on the Northside, then back to Warren Avenue, when I was in the third grade. Then, in about 1968, while I was in the service, my parents moved back up to the Northside.

P: I see. That's my next question. Tell me about your growing-up years, your family.

L: I'm the oldest of ten children.

P: Are you?

L: Yes. We range in age from forty-three, that's me, down to my youngest brother, who I think is twenty-four or twenty-five years old. I used to have it all written down because I used to have to fill out forms all the time in the service, with names, ages, birthdays--all that, and there's no way to remember. You can sort of figure it out if you know a couple of them. You figure, well, nine months You sort of get it. But, there are six boys and four girls. I think, other than those of us who married and moved away, everybody is still pretty much in this area. Me and two of my sisters live in the city, and I've got a brother that lives up in McDonald, two brothers in Cleveland. One brother has moved out to Arizona [and] I've got a brother in Philadelphia and a sister in Boston. She is married to a sportscaster, so she goes where he goes.

P: For the most part, you have been just concentrated in this area? A hometown boy?

L: Yes. Good old ethnic up-bringing. You know your family and your neighbors. The whole world is the way they do it. You don't know anything else until you get away for awhile. But, yes. I spent my whole life here.

P: Very good. Tell me about your high school years. What was high school like?

L: High school was not a challenge.

P: Wasn't it? What school did you go to?

L: I went to Cardinal Mooney.

P: Did you?

L: All my schooling until college was parochial schools. I was at St. Ed's, St. Pat's, and then at Mooney. The biggest problem with high school was that I was never challenged. I spent a lot of time in the Dean's Office having him explain to me what a high I.Q. I had and

what low grades I had. I just got by. I did what I had to. I took Spanish, Latin, Math, English--stuff like that. I excelled in a few classes, but for the most part, was never really challenged to perform. I left high school, went into the service. . . .

P: I was going to ask you. Did you start at Youngstown before you went into the service, or did you wait until you came out?

L: I went in the Air Force right out of high school.

P: You were drafted, or you enlisted?

L: Oh, no. I enlisted. I enlisted before I graduated. I enlisted in March of 1966, graduated in June, went in the Air Force in July, after all the good parties, of course. I didn't have anything else to do, so I left. But, I didn't know what I wanted to do. I've never had, and still don't have a real career goal. I don't know what I want to be. I'm waiting to grow up any day now. I didn't have the means to go to college. Since I wasn't sure what I wanted to do and couldn't afford it anyhow, I went into the service, figuring maybe I'll hit on something while I'm in there and I would earn the G.I. bill, so that when I got out, I could afford to go if I chose to.

P: I see. In the Air Force, what division were you in?

L: I was all over. My classification was Inventory Management Specialist. Basically, I flew desk all over the place. I had a desk job, filling out inventory cards, doing computer reports--stuff like that. I traveled around. My first assignment was with a communication squadron in Fairfield, Travis Air Force Base, just outside of San Francisco. I spent a year and a half there, then went over to Vietnam. I spent a year there, six months in Saigon, six months in Da Nang. In Saigon, I was straight office work. I was checking inventory reports against actual inventory. In Da Nang, I was working NORS Control with the aircraft support, keeping the fighter planes in the air. I was strictly working with fighter aircraft up there. I came back and spent a year in Laredo, Texas, working in a jet engine shop in supplies. I was one of two supply people they had in a field maintenance squadron. So, the only time I was really attached to supply units, per se, was the year I spent in Vietnam. Other than that, I was in communication squadrons or in jet engine shops.

P: Now, when you were growing up, did you travel much?

L: No.

P: So, when you went into the service, this was your first time away from home?

L: It was my first real traveling other than Geneva on the Lake or Presque Isle or Erie. The only places I remember going out of town were, again, family-type things, and that was up to Erie. . . .

P: Yearly family vacations?

L: Yes. That, and my mother's family is from Pennsylvania. So, we would go up to Erie once in awhile or up to Meadville, Pennsylvania once in awhile, but that was it. Probably the furthest away we ever drove was two hours.

P: So, for the most part, you were here all your life?

L: The whole world was right here. This was it. I didn't know anything else, other kinds of people or anything.

P: Where did you do your basic training?

L: Basic training was at Amarillo Air Force Base.

P: What a culture shock from Youngstown!

L: Oh, I remember the morning I woke up. We flew down there at night and we landed in the dark. It was probably 2 a.m. or 3 a.m. I remember waking up. It was probably 6 a.m. or 7 a.m. I was still in civilian clothes. I looked out the window, and there were these formations of buildings. They were called quadrangles, four barracks in a pattern with tarmac path around the inside for as far as you could see. That was in the Texas panhandle. You could literally see to the horizon. I mean, the tallest thing out there was a telephone pole. There were no large buildings. . . . You could see all the way up to Oklahoma. There was nothing out there. It was pitiful. I just woke up, and I remember looking out the window. I got this sick feeling in the pit of my stomach. What in the hell have I done? Where am I? That was it. I was in. They didn't tell us until after they swore us in, I don't remember what the exact chronological events were, but there is actually a rule on the books that until you go through some sort of swearing in, or some deal like that, that you are committed to stay in. Once you get to basic training, you can actually leave and not be considered AWOL because you are not really in the service yet. Well, they swear you in, and then tell you, "Up until now, you could have taken off, and we wouldn't have done anything."

I got down there in July and stayed through November. I did my basic training and my tech school there. . . .

P: Everything in one place?

L: Yes. As it worked out, there was a meningitis outbreak in 1965 or 1966 at Laughlin Air Force Base, which is where all the Air Force basic training was. It was never any place else, or that was the biggest place it was anyhow. They just started taking recruits back in when I went in, about a few months before I started. So, they had them going to Laughlin and going to Amarillo. The thing I remember most about that was that I entered the service on the buddy system. Me and my best friend from third grade went in the service together. We left Cleveland. He went to Laughlin, and I went to Amarillo. I never saw him again for four years, other than a couple times we ran into each other on leave. That's the Air Force's idea of the buddy system. I forget how many of us went in at the same time. Then, we spent a night in Cleveland, then they regrouped us. I didn't know until we got down there that he wasn't around anymore. He never realized that we weren't together until he was at Laughlin for a couple days and was looking around trying to find me. They finally said, "He's not here." He thought I skipped--that I didn't go at all. The first time he went home on leave, which was right after basic training, he went to a unit where they trained him there. I don't remember exactly what he was in. It was supply-oriented also; but he went right to Langley Air Force Base in Virginia, and they trained him there. So, he went home on leave after basic, and that's when he found out that I was still in, in Amarillo. Since my tech school was right there, I didn't even get leave. I went from basic training to another set of barracks, then to tech school.

P: Were you homesick?

L: No. I don't ever remember being homesick. I missed, in terms of weekends and stuff like that, until I made some friends. It was a little bit boring, but in terms of being homesick, in a way that made you feel sad or depressed or wanting to go back, no. After that first morning, I got over that pretty quick. They don't give you much time to think while you are in basic training. I can't ever really say I was homesick.

P: So, when did you get your orders for Vietnam, how long were you in?

L: I went in in 1966 and got my orders on Valentine's Day, February 1968.

P: So, you were in two years before?

L: Yes.

P: Were you in the States?

L: Yes. I was out at Travis at the time. There were four of us that worked together in this communication squadron: a male sergeant, a female sergeant, and two of us who were just airmen, right out of tech school. The other guy was married, and his wife was pregnant. When our orders first came in that morning, our commander came back to talk to us and said, "I've got good news and bad news. One of you is going to Vietnam; one of you is going to Thailand." He showed us the orders. He was going to Vietnam, and I was going to Thailand. After the commander left, we talked. This kid was from California. He was just petrified. He was what you would call your basic surfer. He was in the service to avoid the draft. The thought of going to Vietnam just scared him to death. I had volunteered for Vietnam, and they were sending me to Thailand. So, I had made a friend at an Air Force base around Sacramento where our unit was headquartered. We were a branch of a bigger communications squadron. So, I called down there, talked to a couple of the guys that had done inspections and pulled a few strings. By that afternoon, our orders had been changed. I took the orders for Vietnam, and he took the orders for Thailand.

P: Why did you volunteer?

C: To go. Believe it or not, I did not have a real opinion on the war. I wasn't pro-war, or anti-war. I knew I wouldn't be in combat. I wasn't a pilot. I had talked to guys who had been over there. It was sort of intriguing. They paid you \$55 a month more to be there and you didn't pay income tax. It was a way to make a little bit more money, save a little bit more money. So, I figured that I would give it a shot.

P: You were single at the time?

C: I was single at the time. I had met a girl. . . . We had gone to high school together for four years. We met graduation night at a party at her boyfriend's house. We started dating a couple times a week at parties and stuff until I went in the service. There was no real strong attachment. She's now my wife. The attachment got stronger later.

P: Is she? Oh, that is so nice.

C: We didn't know each other that long. She was going away to college, and I was going in the service. We just sort of made a deal. We decided that it would be better to date, see other people, whatever since we were going to be separated for at least four years. At the end of the four years, if it didn't work out, no regrets. I'd rather apologize for my indiscretions than kick myself in the ass for not having done anything for four years. It worked out real well. We both had the same attitude. She dated other people, although she wasn't as forth right in telling me about it until later, as I was in telling her.

P: Most women are like that I think, really.

C: It was sort of a mutual agreement. There were no real ties, and I wasn't afraid. I didn't fear for anything to happen. I was fairly stupid, I guess. Naive. I knew, if I got drafted, I'd go into combat. Two guys that I hung around with that were older than me had already been killed in Vietnam. One in the Army, one in the Navy. The Navy guy was a corpsman. He was with a Marine detachment. He wasn't even in country a week when he got blown away. The Army guy had been over there about six months. I knew I didn't want any part of that. Going to Saigon. . . .

P: That's where your orders were for?

C: My first orders were for Saigon. Up until I got my orders, it wasn't any big deal. I didn't know when I was going to go when the orders came in. February 14, 1968 was the first night of the TET Offensive. It was one of the biggest Viet Cong attacks on the south.

P: I remember.

C: I remember it too because I didn't see the news that day. The area that we worked in, there were no TV's around. We had a radio going sometimes. Everybody out there liked truck driver music and stuff like that. I remember: going out and getting something to eat after work, going back to the barracks, sitting around and waiting until later in the evening so I could call home and tell everybody I got my orders. Well, they had all seen the news that night. They knew about the TET Offensive, and I didn't. I called them to tell them I've got orders and that I would be going to Saigon. Saigon was the only thing on the news. The base I was going to was under attack. My mother freaked out. My mother was a little bit upset.

P: A little bit?

C: Well, she was in Ohio; I was in California. My girlfriend was real upset. You've got to remember, she's a college student, and by that time she was at Kent State, which was not a bastion of conservatives at the time. The anti-war movement was not real strong around here, but it was gaining strength. She was in a liberal college. Then, all of a sudden, her friend is going over there and all that. . . . They were more upset about it than I was. That was in February. I wasn't leaving until June.

P: So you had quite a few months.

C: Yes. I had plenty of time to get ready, and I left the early part of June [and] landed in Saigon on a Sunday night. That night, there was a rocket attack. It was nowhere near where I was. That was the last rocket attack of the TET Offensive.

P: Really?

C: The first night in from then until I went to Da Nang, the only combat I saw, was in the NCO club and the bars downtown. I was never really involved. I fired a weapon once the whole time I was over there. That was to qualify at the rifle range. In Saigon, especially, I wasn't anywhere near the action. Although, there were incidents in Chu Li, in the Chinese district, and around the PX. You heard about things all the time, but I never saw anything, really. There was nothing to be really afraid of down there. After I was there six months, I got transferred up to Da Nang. Da Nang was a completely different situation. That was pretty much a base under siege. It was in the North. There was a lot more activity, and we were restricted to the base. You couldn't go downtown. You couldn't go out of the base for any unofficial reason.

P: What were your living conditions like?

C: Considering where we were, not bad. We had the same bunks that you have in the States. The buildings were different. We were in what they called "hooches." It was a long narrow building. Essentially, it was two by fours and screen. From the ground up, maybe five feet, there were wood sides, but they were louvered. Then, the top couple of feet was open screen, and then the roof overhung to keep the weather out from the screened-in area. Then, there were some sort of flip-up handles or something like that, I think, that we could enclose. There weren't any windows, it was wide open screen. In Saigon, it never really got that cold. So, it wasn't that big of a deal.

P: It was sort of like a little village-type area?

C: Yes. They were all set off in areas by themselves. I can't remember how many were in our area. There were sandbags all around it, and then, revetments every so often in case we came under attack, barb wire all over the place. The worst thing about where I was in Saigon is we were right next to the Vietnamese Air Force--their buildings. Across the street from us was a tennis court, and it was built in the middle of a field. The field was elephant grass, which was five or six feet high. It was just that field all the way out to the gate. That's where a lot of the Viet Cong snipers hid out during the TET Offensive. They used to sit there and just shoot. One of the guys, that lived in the hooch I was in, got wounded. He got shot in the butt while he was in bed sleeping, actually.

P: Really?

C: Yes.

P: Was there an air strip where you were, too?

C: Yes. At that time, it was the busiest Air Force Base in the world. Planes in and out constantly. You got used to the noise after awhile. The only thing you knew was when the B-52's were taking off because they made a horrendous noise.

P: Yes.

C: The base I was in in Amarillo was a sac base, essentially. They had B-52's, so that was something. The first five months I was in the service, that's all I heard were B-52's taking off and landing. So, it wasn't anything new.

P: Da Nang was entirely different?

C: Da Nang was completely different. The buildings were two stories, more wood. The weather up there got colder in the winter. During the monsoons, it got real cold, but nothing like our winters around here. It was probably like San Francisco, but the conditions weren't as good because you couldn't go downtown. You couldn't go get a good meal anywhere; whereas in Saigon, you could. There were fabulous restaurants and hotels and things in Saigon. You could go out evenings until curfew, or weekends. I was in Saigon all the time.

P: Were you?

C: I don't remember the names of places or hotels. A lot of guys do. I don't know that I paid that much atten-

tion to the names. But, we used to go out and rent a pennycab or one of those motorcycle push deals where you sit in the front and have races down the street. I remember going past the presidential palace and things like that.

P: Did you? That was one of my questions. What was your typical day like and your evenings?

C: In Saigon, I spent most of my time on the base at night. There were times I went down in the city with a couple guys that I worked with. The one building we worked in was right next door to an Army unit of some kind or another. I don't know what these guys did. I'm not sure if we were supposed to know what they did. The one guy was a sergeant. He had been in twenty-some years, and he and I got to be good friends. He lived downtown in a villa that had at one time, been the home of some rich people. Basically now, it was taken over. It was in an alley between two streets. There were probably four or five villas on this alley. I remember big steel gates at either end. The gun towers. They hired their own guards. Part of their rent went to pay people to man these towers at night with machine guns and stuff. He lived there.

There was another guy that was an Air Force sergeant. Again, I don't remember what he did specifically, but I do remember that his girlfriend was an officer. They lived downtown, again, which was a no no because an officer and an enlisted person consorting, and all that. I remember spending weekends, evenings downtown with some of these people and partying. We had some television [and] the Armed Forces Radio. The biggest show in Vietnam was "Combat," the World War II TV show with Vic Morrow. That, and "Perry Mason." That was a riot. You are sitting there in Vietnam in the war watching "Combat" and just going crazy.

P: And "Perry Mason" to boot! What major events stand out during this time?

L: My twenty-first birthday.

P: Really?

L: Yes. I turned twenty-one in Da Nang. That was sort of depressing. It was nothing really major during the time I was in Vietnam. There were a couple rocket attacks while I was in Da Nang. We were right next to a hospital. The hooch I lived in was right next to the base hospital. Normally, the way the base was laid out, the runways ran east and west. So, the North Vietnamese were to the north of us, and we were on the south side of the runway. The Marines were on the

north side of the runway. Just north of us was the Oshaw Valley and some mountains, Hamburger Hill, all that stuff that you heard about. . . . In order for the Viet Cong to get a rocket to hit our base, they had to get it over these mountains. So, in order to get the trajectory on it, they couldn't get the distance. Most of the rockets landed on the Marine side. The Marines caught hell. It was almost like it was we were from two different countries. On the side we were on, there would be an occasional rocket attack from the south. I remember one night, I was on the second floor. They tried to hit the hospital. The rockets were going off. The siren went off, and I remember stepping over bodies because I was on the second floor. Shrapnel explodes and goes up. I wanted to get on the ground. I went out the door, over the railing, in the air to the ground below from the second story, and it was all sand. I did this without even thinking. I stepped on four people on my way out. I remember landing in water. The first rocket that came in hit a water main. I landed in about three feet of water and then the sand. It was like diving into a shallow pool. I didn't get hurt. It didn't phase me. I went into the revetment. The revetment had a step over to get into that was about eighteen inches high. I don't know why it was built that way. It was one of the few that I had seen that was built that way. There wasn't as much water in there. It was on a little bit higher ground. So I sat the rocket attack out for about a half hour in there. One of the guys that came down behind me grabbed my TV on the way out. I had a small nine inch Panasonic that was battery charged. So, he grabbed the TV. He was bringing it with him because we were going down into the revetment. He wanted to see if there was anything on. So, I remember it was probably Saturday night. We used to get tape-delayed broadcasts of boxing from L.A. coliseum.

P: Did you?

L: We're sitting in the revetment, during this rocket attack, watching this black and white, watching people box. It was never anything . . . I don't ever remember thinking that my life was in danger. I don't ever remember being afraid that I wouldn't make it out. It was from the day I got there until the day I left, I was going to do my time and leave. I left about a month early.

P: How long were you there?

L: Early June of 1968 until May of 1969. Believe it or not, I got to leave early because there were too many Air Force people in country. We had quotas of how many people there were in each branch of service. This was

the most stupid war. We had this treaty or whatever, I don't know what it was, but it stated how many personnel from each department of the service would be in country. We were over quota on Air Force and short on Navy. So, they actually bumped one hundred forty-some Navy people from a flight, put one hundred forty-some Air Force people on, and shipped us home. Because I had already had my orders to leave, they just bumped them up a month. I had been moved from my normal duty station to a civil engineer unit. So, I was expendable anyhow. I wasn't doing an essential job. So, I got to leave a month early. I remember at that time, I had been contemplating signing up for another six months.

P: Were they actively recruiting you, or did you just start thinking about that?

L: Both. At that time, if you went back to the States with less than twelve months service, you were getting discharged. I had thirteen months. I went in in July. I was scheduled to go back in June. I would have had thirteen months. So, I figured that I would sign up for another six months in country, and they would try to send you anywhere you wanted to go. I wanted to go back to Saigon. So, I was thinking about doing it. My mother was against it. My father was against it. My girlfriend was against it, but I would have gotten out seven months before I did. They figured that I was better off alive in the States than still in Vietnam. Of course, there was no guarantee that I would get transferred back to the States either. I could have ended up in Europe or Guam or someplace. As it turned out, I ended up in Laredo, Texas. You might have well been in Guam. It was out in the middle of nowhere, dirt roads, outside toilets, 93 percent illiteracy rate.

P: What an experience!

L: My best duty station, when I was in the Air Force in the four years I was in, was Saigon. Most of my fond memories of the service were from Saigon, seeing different parts of the world, meeting different kinds of people.

P: Did you learn the language too?

L: You learned enough to get by, to order food, to order drinks, talk to the maids and things like that. You learned to swear in Vietnamese. Why that comes to you so easy, I don't know. But, it was amazing the number of people over there who spoke English.

P: Good English?

L: Good enough to understand. They got by. I met some very unusual people while I was over there. Coming from a small town and having most of your life being oriented around your family, most of which you know, the attitudes you have of different kinds of people, races, whatever, are very narrow. I had an uncle that I swore they created Archie Bunker after. My uncle made Archie Bunker look like a flaming liberal. Those were the kind of people I spent most of my life around. Then, to get in the service with a lot of Blacks from different parts of the country, Mexicans, Indians, some people from mixed races, was completely culture shock. You learned to adjust. I don't really remember having any major problems. There was a lot of voluntary segregation. The Blacks and Whites seemed to separate just on their own. The Southerners, especially. They didn't want anything to do with northern Whites either. The Blacks pretty much stayed off to themselves. There were a lot of different facilities. Again, voluntarily, not forced. I remember in Da Nang, the Airmen's Club was almost all Blacks. If you were White and you were in there, there were some nights where you could have real problems. The NCO Club, on the other hand, was mostly White. There were a few Blacks that frequented it. There was never very much trouble. But, the Airmen's Club was bad news. Then, some Marines would come over. With guys coming out of combat--you are around those guys--it could be trouble anytime.

When I went to Saigon, I remember a girl I used to see once in awhile. You can define "see." Her mother was Cambodian. Her father was Indian, from India. She was a translator for the Army. She spoke seven or eight languages fluently. She spoke English as good as anybody back here. She worked part-time for the Army. She had an apartment in one of these villas with some of these people I knew, so we became fairly good friends. I remember I used to take her to the PX a lot. The Vietnamese didn't have access to great groceries, but if you could get in the PX. . . . Like I said, I used to take her in with me as my guest. They had meat, some fresh produce, and things like that.

P: She at least had a better life?

L: Well, and I'm sure she fenced some of it. That was like a part-time job also. She was very well paid by the Army. A lot of Vietnamese, the average everyday Joe on the street was fluent in Vietnamese [and] was fluent in French. Because of the French occupation being there for so long, they had to know French to survive. Now, they were becoming fluent in English because they had to know English to survive. It always amazed me that some mamasan who never had an education

at all, who was doing laundry and polishing boots, could speak three languages fluently; while we--over there, looking down our nose at these people, could speak only one, and a lot of us didn't speak it real well. You start thinking about these kinds of things, and it's one of the things that always fascinated me about people. The attitude some people have about other people, when you can see that they are obviously at least as good as you, if not better in some respects for all they've been through.

P: Very enterprising.

L: [It was] very enterprising for an economy that had no basis. There were no great jobs. In Saigon at that time, there was no real industry. The black market was going great guns, so everybody . . . you bartered a lot of things. There was a lot of import/export stuff. But, if you were an American, the position you had in the service could make you a wealthy person, could make you a high profile person.

I remember a guy who worked in the same office I worked in. He was a big fat guy from Louisiana. Not a general slob, but a big, heavyset, not-at-all-handsome kind of guy. But it was his job to pay this trucking company their check monthly for the work they did for the government. Well, over there and in talking to other people in other branches of the service that were in foreign countries, those people see that check as coming from you, not from the government, not from the president. You hand them the check; you're God. Well, this guy had a great life in Saigon. He lived in a villa that was mainly inhabited by the family that owned this trucking company. He was treated like a king because he was the one that gave them the check. We paid these people exorbitant amounts of money, probably more than a fair price. But, it was to stimulate the economy. We don't know who controlled what, but I'm sure there was loads of graft and corruption. I'm sure this guy had a neat bank account back home in Louisiana or somewhere in the South, wherever he was from. I'm sure his entire paycheck and a few bucks more than that got deposited. He was never without wine, women and song. He had it great. That was mainly all he did. He would check their books, double check the invoices; and he issued their check to them.

Part of the family's operation was stealing and reselling military semi's back to the government. They would steal the trucks from the docks, and the government would end up buying them back. They would steal them . . . part of the games that went on over there.

P: While you were there, what images of home did you carry

with you? What did you focus on from here that sort of got you through or not. . . ?

L: Believe it or not, I was having such a good time in Saigon that . . . again, I wasn't homesick. I wasn't in a situation where I felt desperate, or I felt that I was some place where I didn't want to be or some place where I wasn't going to come back from. Other than letters from home, a lot of letters from my brothers and sisters. . . . My youngest brother--I went in the service, and he was eleven months old. He had only met my girlfriend, one, maybe two times. There was a picture in Parade Magazine, maybe, just after I got to Vietnam of this guy in a military uniform with a girl. They were on the cover. She fairly resembled my girlfriend. I don't know what the guy looked like, but he was in uniform. My brother walked around with that picture--at that time, he would have probably been two going on three years old--telling everybody that that was his brother and his girlfriend, stories like that. Crayon drawings--my brothers and sisters all sent me pictures, things like that. But as far as remembering family dinners and family gatherings, no.

P: . . . Or hanging on to something?

L: No. Like I said, I didn't feel desperate. I don't remember doing any of that sort of thing.

P: Did you do that in Da Nang more so than in Saigon, or not at all?

L: No. By the time I went up to Da Nang, I had already been in country six months. My job in Da Nang--the working hours were a lot longer. . . .

P: The twelve-hour shifts or more?

L: Yes. Usually, at least twelve hours shifts, sometimes, six or seven days a week. It didn't give you much time. My job in Saigon was from seven o'clock until five o'clock or seven o'clock until six o'clock. I very rarely got to work before seven o'clock, and I could be in and out of the office, pretty much at will, checking inventory, checking warehouses. It wasn't like I had to be there. It wasn't like I was tied down. Da Nang was different because of the aircraft supporting the fighter planes. It was pretty intense. So, work was a lot harder. The hours were longer, and you didn't have that much free time, really, to do things. The NCO Club there was pretty decent. When I first went up, I was still an airman. I went up around Christmas of 1968, and I remember turning twenty-one in March. You had to be twenty-one and an NCO. I was already an NCO, but I wasn't twenty-one yet to get in

the NCO Club. That was a great day going in the NCO Club, but there was enough booze and other things available in the barracks where it wasn't necessary to go to the clubs. We would sit around and drink, play cards, stuff like that. It wasn't like there wasn't anything for you to do. So, it wasn't that bad. I adapt well to situations. I'm even happy working here. If I can do that, I can be happy anywhere. I have always been able to adapt to where I was at. I don't know why. Going out to California, not knowing anybody, you make friends; you start doing things. For lack of boredom, you read, watch TV, whatever. So, I'm not a loner by nature in terms of wanting to be on my own; but when I'm on my own, I can still find things to do. I don't sit around and feel sorry for myself, or anything like that. So, I was never one for things to do.

I was probably more bored in Laredo, Texas when I got back, than I ever was in Vietnam. I think, if I ever felt desperate any place in the service, that was probably it. I kept thinking, "Another six months in country, and I could have been home; and I'm in this God-forsaken place?" I had bought a car when I came back. So, I had a car. The first wheels I ever had in the service.

P: What did you buy?

L: I had a 1963 Riviera. It was a bank-repo.

P: Even then?

L: Yes. Even then. A forbearing of things of the future. My father worked for Dollar Bank and he called around a couple of his buddies. One of the banks repoed this Riviera. It wasn't in bad shape. It needed tires, brakes, engine work. One of our neighbors was a mechanic. So, I bought it, turned it in to him. He couldn't get it ready for me by the time I left for Laredo. So, I flew down to Laredo, and my parents took a vacation and drove the car down to Laredo. It was one of their first big vacations. Then, they flew home. It was the first time my mother had ever flown. My father tells me that was a real experience. It was interesting. That was the fanciest car my mother had ever been in. This thing had everything in it. My father drove a stationwagon, your basic Ford with a stick shift, AM radio, and a heater, if you were lucky. So, here's Mom and Dad in a 1963 Riviera, air, full power, AM/FM, leather seats, the whole bit. They're tooling down to Laredo, Texas. They went to Houston. They went to the Astrodome, all that sort of stuff; and then, I drove them from Laredo up to San Antonio. We went to see the Alamo. We spent the day up there, and

[I] put them on a plane and sent them back home. So then, once I had my wheels, it was easy to make friends in Laredo, male and female. If you had wheels, you were a different person.

I hooked up with a guy from New Jersey, Gino--something or other--he was an Italian kid--and a Black kid from New York City. The three of us were almost inseparable. We didn't work together, but we always hung out together.

P: You just sort of gravitated toward each other?

L: I think we met when they wanted to borrow my car one night. I told them, "Fine, if I went with it." So, we went down to Nuevo Laredo in Mexico. They had been there for awhile and knew a couple girls, and went over to some of the discotheques and things. Nuevo Laredo is right on the other side of the border. We met some people, and I met a girl that I saw off and on, a real nice girl. She was in a promised marriage. The Mexican's still did that. They were a real prominent family. The father, I think, had a construction business or a cement company or something. She was promised to some guy, and they were getting married in a couple years, or whatever. So, in a way, it was good because nothing was ever going to come of it. Her parents would have never stood for it. But, we became good friends. We saw each other quite a bit. One of my most interesting experiences in the service was on a date with her because three of us had taken out her, her sister, and another girl. We went to this bowling alley to play fuse ball. There was no one in this place. It was 6 p.m. during the week. So, there were six of us in there, drinking beer, fooling around; and here comes this motorcycle gang. They were some bad news dudes. They were walking right at us. I'm thinking, "I'm going to die."

P: Did you have your uniform on?

L: Oh, no. But, you could tell by the haircuts. There is no way to disguise that. There weren't that many Anglos in Laredo either. We were in a place where those people didn't go. It was mainly Mexican's and a few Blacks that were around. These guys were coming right for us. I remember one hundred of them, or ten. Maybe eight. They were some strange looking guys. When I was out in California, I had seen the Oakland Hell's Angels and all that. These guys were every bit as scary as those guys. Real motorcycle gang types. I'm thinking, "I'm going to die in a bowling alley in Laredo, Texas. Please, Lord, get me out of here!" Well, here, the girl I was seeing was the sister of the head of this motorcycle gang. He was coming into meet

me to check me out and all that kind of stuff. We got to be good friends. Her brother Joe. He was a wild man, but he had all this family money behind him and could do whatever he wanted. Local authorities wouldn't touch him with a 10 foot pole. If he ever got in trouble, he was back across the border. So, from then on, I was as good as gold in Laredo. There were very few places I worried about going. Because it's a small town, everybody knows who you are, and people saw the silver Riviera. I never had any trouble. I never had any trouble down there with gangs, kids, fights, citizens, anything like that. One of my buddies who came--we were friends in Vietnam--he got stationed down there. He got there about two weeks after me. One of the civilians he worked with was also a prominent businessman, and because he was stationed on the base, we went down and drank with these guys once. This was with the Chamber of Commerce, per se, and we drank in a bar with a dirt floor.

P: That's amazing!

L: So, I knew both sides of the civilization down there. It was a depressed area. There was a Levi's factory, and UniRoyal Tires had a test track down there. That was it. Everybody else was migrant farmers. Most of the people you met there were kids, and their parents were out on the road somewhere picking produce somewhere. [That was] in some respects, as desperate a place as Vietnam was for the people and the situation.

P: That's right in the U.S.A.

L: Right. Well, for all intents and purposes, it was still Mexico. We were right on the border. There wasn't much difference from one side to the other. A lot of streets weren't paved. There was one big hotel right on the border, I remember, right on the bridge that went across; but other than that, everything was small buildings, mostly outdoor plumbing. Nothing really fancy.

P: So, when you came back there wasn't really any adapting, so to speak?

L: No. It was pretty much the same type situation. There wasn't a whole lot to do. Every once in awhile. . . . The guy I bunked with was from Cincinnati. He was a real straight-laced guy. Every once in awhile, we'd go up to Houston for a football game. He went up to Dallas for the Cotton Bowl the year I was there. We went up to Houston two or three times. I know we went up for the Houston-Cincinnati game. I remember that because we were standing in line and this guy came up to us in a trench coat with an old crumpled hat and

asked us if we were military people. And, we said, "Yes, we're up from Laredo." He asked who we were cheering for. The guy said, "Well, I'm from Cincinnati. So, naturally, I'm going to cheer for Cincinnati." He says, "Well, I'll give you a couple tickets. Go on in and watch the game on me." So, we took the tickets from him. What the hell! If they were no good, we could still buy our own. Well, we had two of the greatest seats in the place. This guy was some local, wealthy dude, oil guy. It didn't look like he had two nickels to rub together. He bought two rows of seats. There was a ton of seats, and he gave the tickets away. He would give them to friends; and whatever tickets he had left, he tried to give the people before the game. He'd watch the first half; and then, he'd leave. We watched the Houston-Cincinnati game. That was in the Fall of 1969. That's the only one I specifically remember because we got in for free. We were in the second level of seats. We could see everything. We met some other people who had been there before and had gotten tickets from this guy, and they told us all about him. He was a real eccentric kind of guy. He had all this money and didn't know what to do with it. He didn't buy us any beer and hotdogs, but the seats were free. I figured, if he's eccentric, he could at least have gone a litter further than that. That was fun. That was different.

P: Tom, there was a big difference in the United States when you left and when you returned. What did you think? When you left, you went to an area of the world that you volunteered to go to, and you came home with no thanks. . . .

L: There was a bigger difference in me than there was in the country.

P: Really?

L: Again, coming from Youngstown, this was a small town; and I don't think the people who stayed here and the events around here, the change, had anything to do with the war. The biggest thing that went on here was Martin Luther King got killed. The riots, the curfews. . . . I was over in Vietnam having a good time, and people back here were in their houses on curfew. My cousin was sleeping in a tent at the football field at South High because he was in the National Guard, and they got called up. He was probably in more danger there than I was. Things were different here that way. One of the most striking differences in terms of things outside of myself was going up to Geneva on the Lake and meeting some of my wife's friends. Again, these are people from Kent State. A couple of them were professors, and they knew I was in

the service. They knew I was Mary's boyfriend, and they knew I was coming up for the weekend. They're expecting this "baby killer," and they didn't know what to expect. They had visions of probably what the media portrayed as the "normal" Vietnam Veteran, the crazed killer with the glassed-over eyes, still wearing his fatigues and jungle boots. . . .

P: Carrying his gun. . . .

L: Yes, or wishing he could. Knives and guns and things hidden all over his body. I showed up in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt and sneakers looking pretty "normal." The people were expecting this crazed psycho, and they were amazed that I was. . . . I could have been a "normal" college kid if it wasn't for the fact that they knew I was different too. But that first night, after a very short period of time, we all were getting along real well. A lot of them were anti-war. When I went over, I had no opinion. I wasn't political at all. I didn't have preconceived notions. I wasn't a patriot. I wasn't going over to save the world. I wasn't going over to defend my country. I wasn't going to save the world from Communism. I was going over for the extra \$55 a month. I was not a mercenary, because I wasn't involved in combat. I was in the service for the G.I. bill, and I was in Vietnam because they paid more money. I came back anti-war. The things I saw, the conditions of the people, the determination of a lot of those people to see the North win.

Again, I was around average people, lower class people. The attitude of U.S. military personnel towards the Vietnamese was unbelievable. They were referred to by various and asundry nicknames, none of which were complementary. They were treated like dirt. We're in their country. . . .

P: Yes.

L: Granted, a lot of us didn't want to be there; a lot of them didn't want to be there. It didn't make much difference to me. I had never seen people treated that way. That stuck with me. We had got to see a lot of the military papers, the Stars and Stripes, and we had gotten articles from home to see the difference between what the American military media was telling us what was going on, which wasn't true, and what the American liberal press was telling people, which wasn't true either. Being there and seeing what was going on, you either get real confused or you figure it out that it was all a bunch of crap. That probably started me on my path of cynicism. I don't remember being . . . I remember being a smart-mouth. I wouldn't say I was much of a rebel or antisocial or things like that. I

remember getting very cynical in the service. Not being able to believe anything you read. There were articles about things that went on where I was, not just other places in the country, where I knew what happened. You read about it in the military paper, and you read about it in the American papers; and they are not even close. We got politicized a little bit while we were over there. We met a lot of lifers who were pretty much anti-war by the time they were ready to leave. None of us really knew what the hell we were doing over there or what we were fighting for. The war was being run by politicians. You got a sense of that. I wasn't active in any groups or anything like that, but when I came back and thought about things and started to formulate opinions on what was going on there, you get into discussions. I was back one day, and everybody's asking me, "What was it like?" They want to hear that we're saving the people and all that sort of stuff. I remember the looks on their faces when I told them about what really went on while I was over there.

P: People did ask you questions?

L: Oh, God, yes. My family and my girlfriend's family. They were buying the American line hook, line, and sinker that we were saving the world, the domino effect. We were stopping Communism here; we were helping the people. That's not the Vietnam I knew, both Saigon and Da Nang. The living conditions, I saw what the people had to put up with. I saw the way we treated them. . . .

P: And, people asked you about it? They just didn't ignore you?

L: No! Again, this was all family. I wasn't one of those people who expected parades. That kind of stuff at that time didn't bother me. That began to bother me later on, after I was in school and after I was working. Again, being over there, being in the service and being in Vietnam, you didn't see what was going on back here, what was being said and all; but one of the incidents back here that brought things home to me were the shootings up at Kent State because my girlfriend was there at the time. She was in Kent State. I was in Laredo. They had an anti-war demonstration. The Ohio National Guard is on campus. They shoot students; they wound some; they kill some. The students' lockers are gone through, no search warrants; their rooms are torn up. Students are being pushed around; students were bayoneted in the library. Things were done to people who were not protesting. I was in Laredo on an Air Force Base, and a lot of the guys I worked with, including the older guys, the lifer's, knew my girl-

friend was in Kent State. Those guys came to me when they heard the news wanting to know if I had heard from Mary. You couldn't get a phone call through for anything. These guys were totally freaked out that the National Guard was on a college campus. These were guys who had spent time in Vietnam or spent time in the service. A lot of them were career military people; and the thought that we were in Southeast Asia, that fifty-some thousand people were killed there, that they spent time, a year, over there away from their wife and kids, and they come to find the National Guard on a college campus shooting American students, these guys couldn't deal with it. More than a few of them said, "Hey, call her up. Get a hold of her; fly her down here. She can stay with my family, spend a week, and get away from it." I remember my wife's family--their attitude was [that] the military was right, [and] the students were wrong; they should have shot more of them, things like that. The only one civil to her at that time was her brother who was home on leave from the Army. He was a captain at the time. He was just back from Ethiopia on his way to Indiana to Butler University. He was sympathetic because he had been around. My wife's great aunt, who was in her late eighties, early nineties at that time, who read everything--anything that had printing on it, she would read it. She knew more about what was going on--she wasn't pro-student, pro-military. She was objective. She had an open mind. She could discuss this thing, at least, civilly. But her parents were like, "They should have shot them all." A lot of the people back here in Youngstown . . . this happened to me. I got out of the service in July. I remember being in more than one fight and going after more than one of my friends in a bar or at a party for some of the things they said. These were guys who never spent time in the service. You can call them draft-dodgers, but college students, whatever. Their attitude was that they should have shot them all. I'm thinking, "Okay, Mary's up there; she wasn't doing anything. They should have shot them all? They should have shot her?" This processed real quickly. I'd be across the bar, across the table, whatever. On more than one occasion, I went after somebody. In a couple cases, they were people who were supposedly friends of mine. Some of these people, I still have no use for. None of them knew what the hell was going on. They had never left Youngstown. I had just returned. You can tell people who have never been anywhere than here.

P: That's true. It's like a little badge that they wear.

L: No! You can't define it, you can't explain it, but boy, they sure stand out. I don't know. Narrow-minded, biggotted, self-centered. Their whole world is the

fifty people they know or their family or whatever. They have never been on their own or have been out of this area. So, there were some problems that way. Again, that was, for the most part, minor. As the years went on, you see the movies about the Vietnam Veterans. I don't remember very many Vietnam Veterans who were portrayed as even possibly normal. We were all crazed killers, baby killers. Even if we didn't kill anybody over there, we were so psyched out by the war that we came back here nuts. Stuff like that. That stuff started playing on me. Only occasionally, the only real remnants. . . . Because I'm not a joiner. I didn't join Vietnam Veterans Against the War, or I don't ever remember marching in any demonstrations. In arguments, I would take more of an anti-war-type position, only because I had been there. I had opinions and I wasn't real convinced that 1) we should have been there; 2) that we were doing the best thing for anybody while we were there. I remember when I was getting out of college and looking for work. For a long time, I was depressed, not clinically depressed, but it bothered me tremendously that here I was, a Vietnam Veteran, a college graduate, no criminal record and to me, a "normal" human being. I couldn't find a job. I had the attitude that somebody owed me something. Somebody had better give me a job. I didn't do all of this for nothing. Eventually I talked myself through that. I said, "Hey, you went for the G.I. bill. You went to Vietnam for the \$55. Don't start thinking that they drafted you. You went voluntarily. Nobody owes you crap. Get off your ass; go find a job. Keep looking until you find one. They are not going to knock on your door."

P: How long did it take you to find a job after you graduated?

L: I graduated from college in March of 1975, and I had a teaching certificate. I was certified to teach high school English. I did substitute teaching at Liberty and at Fitch, and I looked for a job until September of 1975. That's when I was hired by State Savings to open their office in Boardman. I had gone through everybody my father knew, everybody that I knew, networking, the whole bit. I can't tell you how many resumes I sent. I had been to Maine. By the time my girlfriend and I were married--we got married in 1971--I was working in the mill and she was in school. I got married; I worked for a year. She graduated, got a job. I quit and went to school on the G.I. bill.

So, she was already finished with school and she was teaching up in Warren at West Junior. I was looking for a job. Believe it or not, this was one of the . . . two times, I guess. The first time that

sticks with me that I really felt discriminated against. . . . In Ohio, there's a law that if you go into the teaching profession, they have to pay you for your military experience as though it were teaching experience. This was something after World War II, or Korea. But, in the 1970's, it became a handicapp. Here I am: twenty-five, twenty-six, or twenty-seven years old, a college graduate, four years in the service, a Vietnam Veteran, honorable discharge, all the right papers, things were looking good. I can't find a job in education because they would have to pay me as though I was a fifth year teacher? Nobody had any interest in doing that. Things were tough around here economically. This was just before the mills went down, and things weren't that great around here before the mills went down. People remember the mills as the end of the economy. The economy around here was pretty bad before. So the Youngstown City Schools would not hire me because they would have to pay me more money and I didn't have any experience. The suburban schools, who could afford to pay me, wouldn't hire me because I didn't have any experience. I didn't have a shot. I went up to Maine. I had a good shot at a job up there, had I been up there a month earlier. I went up there in August, and it was too close to school starting. But, a superintendent of a system up there interviewed my wife and I and had openings for both of us. Paying all of about five thousand dollars a year, something like that. But, we would have both been up there. We would have both been working. In those days, ten thousand dollars a year was big money.

So, I couldn't get a job because I was a veteran. There were times off and on that I still feel as a veteran if they can do things for other groups of people, for minorities, for women, find me a group. It's sort of a crutch because things haven't always gone that well, I haven't always made as much money, I haven't always had the position or stature. I see other people getting something for nothing and hell, I've earned something for nothing as much as them. It's nothing that keeps me awake at night. . . .

P: But, it's a reality. . . .

L: Well, that, and most of my waking moments, I realize that I am in control of my own destiny. If I am not happy with what they pay me in any given job here, for example, I can go find a better paying job. No one is holding a gun to my head saying, "Okay, Tom, you have to work here." I'm here by choice. I remain here by choice, and I can choose to leave. So, no one does owe me anything. I don't ever remember being beat out for something because of a minority program, a women's program, or anything like that. So, there is no rage

or revenge factor, or anything like that. But, every once in awhile when things aren't going that well, or when you wish things were going better, I still feel a little bit that there should have been something more in. . . . I don't know maybe it sounds like I feel cheated. Maybe I do. I remember one of our illustrious governors, whose name escapes me, paying the Vietnam Veterans a bonus one time. I don't remember how much it was. It was a lump-sum type deal. Everybody that was in Vietnam got it, \$300 or \$800. It was phenominal. I remember that. That didn't satisfy my need. I still feel that we were being bought off in a way because there were a lot of veterans out there who were messed up, that there was no safety net for them in any way. A lot of guys didn't have jobs. A lot of guys came back to jobs, but then lost their jobs because the companies closed down or whatever. You have these illusions that you did everything right, that everything should be okay for you and it's another one of life's experiences, that things aren't always the way you imagine them. Things are tough. There is a book out by . . . the guy's last name is Peck, I forget what his first name is. He is, I guess, a psychologist and a Presbyterian minister, I think. It's called The Road Less Traveled. Everybody was into this book. I remember reading in one of the first two or three paragraphs the sentences, "Life is difficult." I stopped reading the book there. I already know that! There is nothing else in that book that is going to do anything for me! Nobody owes you anything. You are not entitled to anything because you're male, white, a veteran, whatever. You can make or break it on your own. There's no fate, no karma. There are coincidences. Some people hit it good; some people hit it bad. When you look around, you don't always have everything you want, but you got everything you need.

P: Well, thank you very much for doing the interview, Tom.

L: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW