

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
PAUL T. MCMAHON
Military Intelligence, Army, Vietnam War.

2004

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McMahon, Paul T., (1945-). Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 80 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Paul T. McMahon talks about his service with the 525th Military Intelligence Group during the Vietnam War. McMahon discusses being born in England to a World War II war bride, immigrating to DeForest (Wisconsin) when he was three months old, and hearing stories about his grandfather who was a Spanish American War veteran. He mentions graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, getting drafted in the fall of 1968 while attending Georgetown University (Washington, D.C.), and having boot camp at Fort Campbell (Kentucky), and he notes the youth and lack of higher education amongst the other draftees in his platoon. McMahon speaks of Army Intelligence Training School at Fort Holabird (Maryland) and Vietnamese language training school at Biggs Field (outpost of Fort Bliss, Texas). He mentions trying to avoid being sent to Vietnam and the bad attitude of the soldiers stuck in language school. He states he was married while at Biggs Field and lived off base. McMahon touches on the rumors flying around while awaiting final orders in California. Flown to Long Binh, he describes his first impressions of Vietnam, the smell of the huge latrines, and the unfairness of making the locals take care of the Army's sewage. Assigned to the 525th Military Intelligence Group in Military Region 1, McMahon comments on being sent from Saigon to Da Nang to Quang Tri and describes living at a military compound in Quang Tri City. He touches on his unit's cover name, the climate, and the lack of entertainment options. Despite being an E-5 sergeant, McMahon explains being documented and treated as a first lieutenant to save face with his officer-heavy Vietnamese counterparts, lying to the other American officers about his rank, and pulling Officer of the Day duty. He details a routine workday translating, verifying, and compiling intelligence reports. McMahon reflects on visiting the DMZ, flying over Khe Sanh, and feeling thankful that he was stationed in the city. He highlights his discomfort at being ordered to debrief a field agent on the road. He explains that despite his language training, he could not affectively communicate with or eavesdrop on Vietnamese natives. McMahon speaks about his interactions with civilian hooch maids and teaching English to Vietnamese businessmen. He addresses a disconnect between the weapons he trained with in the States and the weapons used in Vietnam, and he states his unit's cover story was compromised by his being assigned different weapons than the other officers. McMahon recalls being sent out to "refamiliarize" with weapons he'd never used before and avoiding using them so that no one would catch on he had no experience with them. He reflects on the unfairness of awarding of medals to officers doing desk work and details offending a major by turning down a bronze star. He portrays the general attitude of troops in Vietnam, reflects on the inadequacy of his training, and talks about having R&R in Mount Horeb (Wisconsin) and the difficulty of leaving his wife again to go back to Vietnam.

McMahon conveys his elation upon getting his orders to return to the States, flying back with people he knew from intelligence school, and being told to straighten up by Military Police. He describes his return to civilian life in Madison (Wisconsin), being struck by the comparative wealth of the United States to Vietnam, having difficulty finding a job, and feeling that his time in Vietnam was wasted. McMahon reflects on being hired by the Department of Veterans Affairs despite having anti-war sentiments and the reasons he eventually quit. He discusses his involvement with the Madison Chapter of Veterans for Peace and their counter-recruitment efforts. McMahon speaks about his fundraising efforts to get author and photographer Nina Berman to do a public lecture in Madison and his opinion of her book, *Purple Hearts: The Return from Iraq*. He touches on returning to Vietnam in 1995.

Biographical Sketch:

McMahon (b.1945) served in the Army from 1969 to 1972 and was in Vietnam from February of 1971 to January of 1972. After the war, he settled in Madison (Wisconsin) and became an active member of the Madison Chapter of Veterans for Peace.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2004
Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2010
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Transcribed Interview:

Jim: 2004. My name is Jim Kurtz, and I'm interviewing Paul McMahon. Paul, could you tell us when and where you were born?

Paul: I was born December 21st, 1945, the longest, darkest day of the year, in Kingston-on-Thames, Surrey, England.

Jim: Kingston-on-Thames. How do you spell that; is that S-U-R-, Surrey?

Paul: Surrey, S-U-R-R-E-Y.

Jim: E-Y, okay.

Paul: Surrey is the county, and Kingston-on-Thames is really, now, a southwest suburb of London.

Jim: Okay. And were your parents English, or--?

Paul: My mother was an English war bride. She got married to my father, who was a member of the U.S. Army stationed in England at Bushy Park. Bushy Park and Richmond Park were large encampments in Surrey, right outside of London where American forces were stationed.

My father was by training a telegrapher. He worked for the railroad. But in a case where—so many people have seen this—when he went into the Army, instead of putting him in the Signal Corps because he knew something about code, they made a cook out of him. And so he was, as we called them in the Vietnam era, a “shake and bake,” tech sergeant, I think, in the Army. And he got to know my mother, and got married in 1943 during the war. I have an older brother who was born—he's two years older than I am. He was born during the war, and I was born in December after the war had ended in Europe, after the war had ended, period.

Jim: Okay.

Paul: And my mother immigrated with two little children and met my father in Wisconsin, rejoined my father in Wisconsin.

Jim: Okay, so your father left England with his unit, and then--.

Paul: He left in June of 1945 and I was born six months later. And we immigrated in March of 1946. My mother did when I was three months old, and my brother was two years and three months old. And my mother came across on the *Queen Mary*, which had been converted to ship, to troop use during the war. But it was back in civilian status. And it brought

hundreds, if not thousands, of British war brides over to be repatriated, in a sense, with their spouses.

Jim: Where did you grow up, then, Paul?

Paul: Grew up in a small town north of here called DeForest. My father was from Columbia County originally, from a small town called Doylestown-- a couple of houses with a railroad tracks running through the middle of it on the main line of the Chicago-Milwaukee Railroad between Milwaukee and Portage and the Twin Cities. So my parents lived there briefly when my mother came over, and then my father moved to DeForest. And he was, basically, the depot agent, the railroad depot agent for many, many years there.

Jim: Did you go to high school in DeForest, then?

Paul: I went to grade school and high school in DeForest, yeah.

Jim: What year did you graduate?

Paul: 1964.

Jim: 1964. What did you do after you went to high school?

Paul: I went to UW-Platteville and majored in political science, minored in French, and graduated from there in 1968.

Jim: And after you graduated from Platteville, what did you do?

Paul: I went to one semester at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., on a fellowship. And I was in that fall semester. November, I was drafted. I received my draft letter from the President of the United States, which I thought was awfully nice of him to send a personal letter.

Jim: So that was in the fall of--?

Paul: Yeah, November 1968. Or maybe October, I don't know.

Jim: Yeah, doesn't make any difference--fall of '68. So, did you have any relatives other than your father that were in the military?

Paul: My older brother Mike, at the time I was in Georgetown, had actually just returned from—he did two years in the Army—and he'd returned from Vietnam in approximately September of 1968. So I got my draft notice about two months after he came back. He came back and got married.

He'd been in Vietnam as a combat engineer. I had younger siblings at that time, but nobody else at that time was in the military.

Jim: Okay, and just your father?

Paul: Uh huh.

Jim: Did this have any influence on you growing up, your father being a veteran, or--?

Paul: None at all; none at all.

Jim: Okay.

Paul: I was probably more impressed—my grandfather, my father's father--my grandfather was a veteran of the Spanish-American War. In 1898 he was wounded in Cuba, and I always had heard stories about him. He died when I was only a couple of years old. I never really knew him. But there were pictures of him in his uniform, and his friends.

And, in fact, in the family, I've been the one who's inherited those old historic photos that were taken. They were actually taken by a professional field photographer. And I have some very unique images of that time, the late 1890s. I don't have any obviously taken in Cuba, but I have ones in various training encampments in the West and the South prior to going to Cuba. So he was a wounded Spanish-American War veteran.

And my family, my father's family, didn't have anybody in World War I, as it turned out. But my father was in World War II. But none of his siblings were in the military.

Jim: Okay. Did you have any opinion about Vietnam or the Cold War before you went into the military?

Paul: I think I was frightfully devoid of opinion, even when I was in school. Maybe Platteville was isolated. It certainly was isolated from the Dow riots in 1967. I think we had a general awareness, but I think it was a very slow process of developing an opinion about Vietnam. Certainly by the time I had been drafted and I went in, I was intensely anti-war. But it was a very slow process of maturing.

And when you think back to our age then, being twenty-two—twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two—and I look at the kids that I work with now, it's not surprising. You don't really develop a political or historical perspective until you get a little older. So, it was slow to go, slow to come.

Jim: When did you go into the military?

Paul: I actually went in, in February 1969.

Jim: And where did you report to?

Paul: Milwaukee.

Jim: Okay. And then where did you take your basic training?

Paul: Fort Campbell, Kentucky.

Jim: And do you have any experiences from that that stick out?

Paul: Well, what impressed me the most, I was twenty-three—let me think, here—I was twenty-three years old when I, in December of 1968. And by the time I went in I was a couple of months older than that. And the company, training company, I was with was filled with kids--I think there was maybe one college graduate, there were two of us, in other words, out of a company of, I want to say--four platoons, fifty in a platoon--maybe two hundred, hundred seventy-five to two hundred in my training company.

I don't think, let me correct that, I think out of our *platoon* of fifty, there were two of us with college degrees. There were a couple of others who had attended college and dropped out, or whatever; that's probably how they got nailed on the draft. And the rest were eighteen to twenty. There were a lot who were simply eighteen-year-old kids, some of whom had been drafted, who went in the military because they were—it was a question of going to jail or going to the military.

So what struck me was how incredibly young they were. Even though I was only twenty-three, I felt like I was ten years older than most of them. And so, it was a pretty raw, green group, and there wasn't much knowledge among that group.

Jim: After basic training, where did you get your advanced or MOS training?

Paul: Uh huh. I went to Fort Holabird, which is the Military Intelligence School, Army Intelligence School, in Baltimore, Maryland. It was called "USAINTS." You know how fond the Army is, the military is, of acronyms: "U-S-A-I-N-T-S": United States Army Intelligence Training School, I guess, or something like that.

And I spent a few weeks, actually I probably spent a month or so there in a casual status. And then I was in a nineteen-week course, and I was trained

to be an Area Intelligence Specialist, which used to be called an Agent Handler. It was offensive intelligence rather than counter-intelligence. And we were trained in, essentially, espionage practices: recruitment, backgrounds, agent placement, covers, safe houses, all of those things, those kind of cloak-and-dagger things. And [we] spent various time in the field while we were at Baltimore doing field exercises. And then I graduated from there as a corporal in December of 1969.

And then I was assigned to a further step. I went to language-training school. Rather than being shipped at that point anyplace, I was sent to forty-seven weeks of Vietnamese language-training school, Vietnamese language school in El Paso, Texas, at a place called Biggs Field, which is really Fort Bliss. It was a small Air Force outpost next to Fort Bliss, which is the big artillery school in El Paso. And then I spent forty-seven weeks, which is to say, a full year there, which was a lot of time to be in training.

Jim: That's for sure, kind of like going to school.

Paul: Well, I ended up two years in training status, one way or the other, to spend one year in the field in Vietnam. Now, what I should add here, in honesty, is that I was drafted, but my goal was to get out of going to Vietnam.

So I volunteered for intelligence training, which means I gave them three years instead of two. And when I did that I was hoping to get, with a French minor and a language ability, to end up in Europe. Because I had relatives in England and I was hoping to get back there. And I knew there was a chance that I could end up being assigned to, at that time, West Germany. I wasn't necessarily thinking of anyone, but I thought there was a chance of being stationed in West Germany or someplace in the European Theater. But, obviously, it didn't work.

Jim: Yeah, that's right. After you completed your language school, what happened to you?

Paul: Well, I was promoted to an E-5, hard-stripe sergeant, buck sergeant. And then, after about a month off, I was sent to Vietnam through Oakland, California.

Jim: Okay. So, let's see. What was your reaction when you learned that you were going to Vietnam?

Paul: Well, it was odd, because we knew we were going to Vietnam a year before we went to Vietnam. Because they don't send you to Vietnamese language school unless you're going to go. And that served--it was very depressing. It was a situation where we all went to this language school

with really bad attitudes. Because we had no interest in learning the language, so we could go and support a war that we didn't believe in to begin with. So we spent, sort of, forty-seven weeks, uh, being morose and being really disinterested in what we were doing. You've had language training, perhaps, sometime in your life.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: The worst way to teach people language is to stick them in a classroom situation for a full year to learn a language. I don't know who designed that in the Pentagon, but it was very, very poor. The thing was that there were language schools in Virginia. There were language schools in Monterrey, California. Those were both casual status. You could wear civilian clothes, almost like a campus.

We were in military garb all the time in a desert, learning to speak a language you didn't care about to go to a place fighting a war we didn't believe in. So, in that sense, we had this long period of fermentation that went on. Now, had we gotten out of Intelligence School, and it was slam-bam, and Vietnam would have been one shock. But this was, "You're going to go to Vietnam whether you like it or not."

And not everybody out of Intelligence School went. There were some who ended up in Europe. There were some who ended up being assigned to Hawaii, believe it or not. There were some incredible assignments. But about half of us out of Intelligence School were assigned to El Paso, Texas.

The only saving grace in that was, I was with a lot of people I had been with for a long time. A lot of, most of them were college-educated with either baccalaureate degrees or master's degrees. There were a couple of guys from law school who were with our group from Wisconsin. And so they were really a fine bunch of fellows, and they were very intelligent. But, you know, it was just kind of a lousy way to proceed.

I think because I got—I got married in El Paso, Texas, a couple months after I was down there--so I was able to live off base. But it was a long period of realizing that I was going to end up leaving my wife and spending [*time?*] that far away. So, you know, leaving was tough. Leaving was tough for everybody.

Jim: Was your wife a Wisconsin girl?

Paul: Yes, she's originally from Blanchardville, Wisconsin.

- Jim: What was the reaction of your friends, family, and wife when you knew you were going to Vietnam, or about Vietnam?
- Paul: Well, my wife was not pleased, of course. Well, she was my girlfriend at the time that I knew. I was engaged to her at the time I, I received my orders. Um, I think my father probably--my father was a very simple man. He was not one to question authority, and he'd spent his time in World War II, well, you know, regardless of how he spent it. Um, I'm sure my mother was like most mothers. She didn't want to see it happen. I think they were probably resigned to it. I really don't remember a lot of conversation about it.
- Jim: Okay.
- Paul: Uh, and as for friends, uh, I didn't really, you know, you don't really have anybody, I didn't have any hometown friends any more from high school or people who would have any reaction to it. I really had one college friend. But nobody counseled me to go to Canada. Nobody said, "Just refuse your orders. Spend some time in the brig, and get your dishonorable discharge." Uh, uh, it was, uh, we were resigned to it. Of course, I had a brother who'd been there.
- Jim: Yeah, okay. Where and when did you leave for Vietnam?
- Paul: I basically went to Oakland, California, in the middle of January 1971. And I spent two weeks—that was the other thing—we spent two weeks there in a large billet. I mean a massive-sized building where they would sleep hundreds, if not thousands, waiting for final orders. And the rumors that were flying around! This is when Nixon had begun to disengage and was starting to downsize troop commitments. The rumors that were flying around were all the time, of course, that our orders were going to get pulled and we were going to be redirected to Europe or someplace else.
- Well, it never happened. So I flew out about the end of January and flew to Long Binh.
- Jim: Was that by commercial plane?
- Paul: Well, it was a chartered stretch jet where they pretty much gutted the interior and just packed it with bodies. I just remember it being a very, very long and very depressing flight. It was, you know, we bounced, skipped off of Hawaii and we skipped off the Philippines, because we went that way, instead of going the northern route.
- Jim: Yeah.

Paul: And landed at Long Binh in processing, uh, for all intents and purposes around the first of February.

Jim: What was your first impression of Vietnam?

Paul: Well, when you're flying in, you're flying over it, uh, green, smoky. You see a lot of wood fires burning from villages. Hot, polluted.

Jim: Any smell?

Paul: Yeah, there was a smell. It's very hard to define what that smell was. You land in a large, hot, concrete airport. What you smell is jet fuel, and you smell diesel fuel from buses or trucks, whatever you have to get in to get transported away from the airport. There wasn't any shelling going on or any of that random stuff, which does happen occasionally, did happen occasionally when jets landed or took off. If somebody could get close enough to get a pot shot.

But the smell that I most remember is Long Binh, where we were in-processed. I thought it was a sewer. It literally was. You know, hundreds of thousands had gone through it. And, given that this was 1971, I was simply appalled at the condition of the facility.

And I've never seen such large latrines in my whole life. You know, you talk about two-holers or four-holers; there weren't any permanent facilities. There was no sewer system constructed. And I really couldn't understand how, with the millions that had gone into the war, why they wouldn't build a decent facility with a sewage treatment plant. So, the bathrooms there, the latrines there, were probably twenty—you know, it'd be like this room. And probably twenty holes on both sides, *wide* open.

And, of course, all of that human waste, they had to get rid of it. And the locals had that job. They dragged out those boxes, and they carted them away, and they burned them. And, uh, that was, uh, my first major impression of Vietnam is the mistreatment of the indigenous people.

Jim: Okay.

Paul: You know, "We're here to save you. And you can burn our waste. And you'll do it gratefully. [*You should?*] pay for it."

Jim: Were you assigned to a unit, then, or-?

Paul: I was assigned to the 525th MI Group in Saigon. So we were transported into Saigon, which was just this incredibly whirling, packed city, and then we waited orders for assignment to one of the military regions. And I

finally—I don't know, it was a few days later—I got assigned to MR1, military region one, which was headquartered in Da Nang. Da Nang was way up country. You're probably familiar with the territory.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: Da Nang is the old French [*cofe?*] city of Tourane, a beautiful city, really, sitting on the edge of the South China Sea. And that's where China Beach is.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: That was the [TV] series, and it was an in-country R&R point. So we got flown up there on a small Air America plane, like a small, teeny airplane, twin-engine. It was a bumpy ride. And I landed there, probably spent a week there waiting for further assignment. It's funny, when I was in Saigon, I would just as soon have stayed in Saigon. When I was in Da Nang, I said, "Fine, that's enough. Let's stay in Da Nang."

Well, I got orders, then, to go even further north. And I got assigned in the northernmost region of MR1 to a place called Quang Tri City—Q-U-A-N-G T-R-I City.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: Quang Tri City was, Quang Tri Province is the northernmost province in, at that time, South Vietnam. It is immensely poor. It is arid, dusty, a lot of red clay. There was a large combat base there. And I got stationed at a military compound, not on the combat base.

My unit, which had a cover name of, it was supposed to be, it was like the Seventeenth Signal Corps or something—Seventeenth Signal Detachment, or some phony name like that. Obviously they never said, "This is a Military Intelligence Unit." They all had covers. They were at the combat base, and that's the place from which information was disseminated.

Jim: Just looking at the tape.

Paul: Sure. We can stop any time.

But there was a military compound on the east side of the city. Quang Tri was, oh, I don't know, a hundred and fifty thousand. You wouldn't know it. You couldn't tell it was that big, but it was kind of rangy. And so I was at a McBee[?] compound on the east side of the city. It was about, I don't know, it was a hundred yards long and fifty/sixty yards wide. It was just a

compound, and it was where I was essentially billeted and stayed when I wasn't on duty for the entire year.

Jim: Okay. Were you treated as a new person, “cherry” or whatever, when you—?

Paul: Ha! Well, I had a unique status, Jim. When I went to Da Nang, they said they were going to assign me to Quang Tri City to a team up there. And they said, but the situation was this, that we worked with our Vietnamese counterparts. And they were officer-heavy. They had a major, a captain, and a couple of lieutenants, and then they had one or two enlisted. Our side of the--worked in a rice warehouse--our side, frankly, had a lieutenant, maybe two lieutenants, max, a couple or three enlisted. That was it. And so they insisted on documenting me as a first lieutenant. This was a face-saving thing.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: So I spent my entire time in Vietnam documented as a first lieutenant, wearing lieutenant's bars, pulling officer duty, and doing the whole thing, even though I was enlisted. I actually told somebody this when I first got back. I told an officer, a guy in the reserve, and he scoffed at me. He said, “That would never happen.” Well, I said, “Fine.”

Jim: [Laughs]

Paul: It did happen. No, I was paid as an E-5, I was treated as an E-5 internally. But I was expected to put on a show [terms of anything?]. And I had a background cover, you know, where I'd received my officer's training and the whole nine yards.

And at first it made me very nervous, because I just didn't like living this lie. And after a while I got used to it. And it never really was a problem. I only had one or two situations. You learn to avoid certain people, certain conversations in the Officers' Club, because you don't want to get into old stories about either OCS, ROTC, or wherever it was you got your commission, however it was you got your training. So, was I treated as a newbie or a “cherry”? Not really, not once I got up there.

Now, here's the big—the irony was, I was assigned way up there, you know, thirteen thousand miles away from the U.S. I ended up on the same team as one of the guys I was with in Intelligence School in Baltimore, Maryland. A good friend: Tony Cossack[?] was his name. And Tony just laughed. He was from Philadelphia, and he was an E-5 and I was a first lieutenant. And, of course, we had identical training backgrounds, we had

identical experience in the military. And he knew the game; it was okay with him.

So, once in a while, there were a few people who thought I fraternized a little bit too much with him as an enlisted person.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: But we worked together, so that I got away with that. But I had to stay away from the enlisted end of the compound. I didn't go anywhere near the EM, the enlisted club. I probably got better treatment. And I was billeted with a captain in Intelligence who didn't know my background. And I was billeted--one of my best friends was a naval lieutenant. And, till the day I left, they didn't have a clue. They never knew.

Jim: What was your typical duty day?

Paul: We got up—oh, I don't know—7:30 or something. We had breakfast on the compound. The food was good. I mean, I think there was an officers' area, but pretty much it was pretty wide open. The food was actually amazingly good, considering. Never had any complaints about that, but I mean I had a Mess Hall, and it was all a lot of stuff flown in.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: Probably we went to work at 8:00 or 8:30. We drove a jeep to the downtown area, and we were in a South Vietnamese military police compound. And within that compound there was an old rice warehouse. You know, it was maybe thirty by forty feet. It had been cleared out, and there was a row of tables on one side facing a row of tables on the other side. We had typewriters, and we spent our whole day, until about 4:00/4:30 in the afternoon, receiving information that came in from Vietnamese agents. These are people who had been recruited, who lived in the countryside, who watched troop movements, who were aware of things. And they were, obviously, paid for the information. That information was gathered by their handlers. We didn't directly handle anybody, because we weren't indigenous.

And we'd spend the day, basically, translating information, cross-referencing, checking, seeing if we could determine a validity level to the field information. And then we would type it up, and it would get gathered up and it got sent over to this combat base. And it got, I don't know, sent somehow, it got sent south--whether it was couriered or whether it was, I don't know if they had Telefax machines. I have no idea. But it got sent down to Da Nang and Da Nang's stuff got sent to Saigon, and I imagine a

bunch of people down there in some big war room put it all together and decided what they did or didn't do with it.

Jim: So, this was what your routine was for the twelve months you were there.

Paul: Pretty much.

Jim: Did you ever have to pull any guard duty on perimeters, or anything like that?

Paul: I pulled—you tell me the term—"officer of the watch"?

Jim: Officer of the Day?

Paul: Yeah, I did that.

Jim: Not being an officer, and you were Officer of the Day.

Paul: Yup, that's right. I was Officer of the Day, which meant sometimes you were up all night in the command bunker.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: I have to think of the terms, here. It's been a long time. So there would be an enlisted guy on duty with me, and we'd have to authenticate on the radio periodically. And fortunately nothing ever happened. We never took any mortar rounds, or nobody ever did anything.

We were not really the prize. They were, they were—if you went to the DMZ, which was seventeen miles north, there were combat bases up there, or various places. But they're the ones that took constant probings and different things like that.

Jim: Did you get an opportunity to go out of Quang Tri City?

Paul: We went up to the DMZ a couple of times, or right below the DMZ. You know, looking back, it's kind of embarrassing. **[End Tape 1, Side A]**

Jim: Uh, going up to the DMZ, Paul.

Paul: We went up to the DMZ a couple different times. It really gave me some appreciation for how the infantry guys lived. You know, these are guys who are in—I don't know—you know, you're talking about a small perimeter area, but talking about a permanent firebase.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: So they live pretty crude. It's pretty beat down. It's pretty much a mud hole in the rainy season and just a dusty place in those times. And I suspect that they did patrols from that, from that firebase. They had some weapons there. Uh, they frequently took rounds at night, whether they're mortar, or whatever they were. They were constantly looking out for infiltration across those fields.

But we went up there a couple of times just to understand what that looked like. We were desk jockeys, even though we were not desk jockeys like they were in--you know, I guess if you were in Da Nang or if you were in Saigon, you had much better circumstances. You had better food, better booze, better entertainment—or, entertainment at all. But, you know, compared to living underground like a gopher at these permanent firebases, we had it pretty good.

And we flew out over Khe Sanh once or twice, just so we could appreciate it. Khe Sanh was, I think was 1968, the million [south?] Khe Sanh, for an incredible number of days, suffered--. It was one of those, uh, you know, man-to-man things, where we, American commanders and, uh, you know, insisted on showing it could be held. Uh, I guess they *won* in the sense that they never gave it up, surrendered it to the NVA. But it was a tremendous loss of life, and pointless.

So even, even flying out there three years later, uh, it was very impressive. The craters, I mean, they arc-lighted that area incredibly closely. And just, just, and it looked like the face of the moon.

Jim: Can you identify what an arc-light is?

Paul: An arc-light is a B-52 strike.

Jim: Yeah. Did you have any memorable experiences in your tour of duty?

Paul: You know, it's all a, just a faded picture now, Jim, to tell you the truth.

Jim: Okay.

Paul: The most memorable thing I recall, the most uncomfortable thing, uh, we had a situation where one of our, one of the Vietnamese agents in the field—now these agents were woodcutters, farmers, itinerant whatever-they-were. And you understand from Vietnam, it's not like you go through Madison or rural Dane County, like there are roads and streets and whatever. If you're off the, if you're out of the city, if you're out of the area, everything's dirt paths or whatever.

Now, there were a lot of woodcutters. And these are people who would go out where they could find some forest, where they hadn't been defoliated or whatever. They'd harvest wood and they'd bring it back. Everything's carried on their back. And they either—they dry it or whatever—and they sell it as firewood to people in other areas.

So there were a lot of woodcutters who go out, and they would have opportunities. They would see VC, they would encounter NVA forces, whether it be battalion size or smaller, and they were paid for their information. And their trick was staying alive. I mean, you're trying to make a living. You're trying to make a few extra bucks. You're trying not to get shot. Because if they were caught by VC or NVA troops, they were probably interrogated, held, maybe they were mistreated, maybe not.

We had one incident where—I don't even remember why it was—but I had a major, a commander at the combat base who was our main commander in Quang Tri City. He was a major and career man. He directed me to debrief one of these Vietnamese field agents. Now, he broke every rule in the book, because there would be no reason why I would be traveling down I-2, the, the [keelai? what it was called], the main highway coming down from—Highway One.

Jim: Highway One, yeah, “Street Without Joy.”

Paul: Yeah. And that ran, it frankly runs from Hanoi all the way to Saigon. But it ran right through Quang Tri City, right outside. But there was no reason why I should be, uh, driving down that street, or driving down that road, trying to debrief him about what he'd seen on his last encounter, his last mission, sitting there with a Vietnamese translator, because I wasn't speaking Vietnamese.

We had forty-seven weeks of language training, we all passed the test, and there wasn't one of us who could speak Vietnamese. Besides, our training was in classic southern dialect Vietnamese. You could no more speak Vietnamese; you have to immerse yourself into the culture if you want to speak French, if you want to speak German, if you want to speak anything. You have to live with the people, speak it all the time, and start to learn it—to say nothing of rural dialects, to say nothing of slang, to say nothing of terminology.

So I had a translator with me in the vehicle, a young woman who was our main translator, who was a known translator for the Americans. I'm, I don't have any really good reason to be in this jeep. We could have been stopped by the Vietnamese Military Police at any time, or even any of the American MPs. But he, I was directed to do it. And so that was probably

one of the most memorable half-hour/hour trips I had while I was over there.

Jim: Okay.

Paul: But, you know, I was on the edge of insubordination on wanting to do it. Just like, not *just* like, but it would be somewhat analogous to being in the field and getting an order that you know is either wrong or stupid, and then having to decide what you're going to do about it.

Jim: Did you have any contact with Vietnamese civilians?

Paul: Well, yes. I spent some time, well, the Vietnamese served, were the servants of, the Americans while we were there. So there were lots of civilians who worked on combat bases, who worked in some capacities to support the American presence. We had hooch maids. A hooch maid was somebody like a personal maid who cleaned your room. These were two-person rooms. Our billets were actually built by the French, and they were somewhat old. They had tile floors.

But, you know, for a paltry sum of a couple of bucks a week, or whatever it was, they would, essentially, shine the boots, they would do some basic laundry. They would mop out the floor, whatever it was. And so we were always bantering with the hooch maids. They were civilians, and they came off and on, and there were theft issues and all of that.

The other folks that I remember: I had a friend that was a lieutenant, a *true* lieutenant [laughs] from Philadelphia also, and he got into teaching English. He would go, leave the compound at night with permission and meet with a bunch of local businessmen who were interested in learning English. And when—this fellow's name was David—when David left the country three or four months earlier than I did, he asked if I would continue on with that. And so I spent some time, couple, it was one night a week or something, trying to help them learn English.

Jim: Did you form any impressions of the Vietnamese people while you were giving this English training?

Paul: I thought they were like anybody else. They were good people. They were all shapes and sizes. They had, you know, people with good senses of humor and people who were a little more straight. I thought the Vietnamese in general were incredibly hard working. There was an attitude among the GIs that the Vietnamese were lazy and we were fighting their war. I think the Vietnamese were simply trying to survive. This was a civil war that we got ourselves messed up in, and in a war, or any tough situation, people do what that have to do to survive.

- Jim: Did you have any contact with the enemy?
- Paul: Not directly, no.
- Jim: Did you have—
- Paul: The “so-called enemy.”
- Jim: The “so-called enemy,” I’m sorry. Did you have any good-luck charms or anything like that?
- Paul: No, no. I never thought about that. My wife didn’t send me with anything. I suppose my good-luck charm was having her picture and writing to her every day. But nothing in terms of something that I thought was protecting me, no.
- Jim: Okay. Now we’re going to talk about the experience a little bit. Do you have anything to add about the climate, smell, terrain, vegetation that we didn’t talk about when we talked about it earlier?
- Paul: Nothing except that it was, as you know, insufferably hot, insufferably humid. I guess I got there during the dry season in Saigon. But up in Quang Tri it was far enough north to be a different climate, different cycle. I can’t remember if we went through parts of two monsoon seasons. We did get flooded out of our billets twice. The rain is pretty incessant during the monsoon season. It’s really hardly a hard-luck story when you can at least get in a jeep and go to higher ground, as opposed to slogging through the rice paddies.
- Jim: Were you adequately supplied?
- Paul: It was adequate. Being at the end of the line in Quang Tri, we had food and we had clothes and, you know, plenty of boredom. But we didn’t really lack for anything that, in human terms, was necessary.
- Jim: Okay.
- Paul: There wasn’t any entertainment, or there wasn’t much to do, but--.
- Jim: What about weapons, equipment, food? Any observations about any of those?
- Paul: The only observation I have about weapons is that [laughs] I was not—I went through Basic Combat Training, as you know. And when I was in Basic, we learned with an M-14. We qualified on an M-14. We never had

M-16s because it was at a point where there weren't enough, I guess, in Basic. We weren't qualified in anything else. And I didn't take any advanced training. Now, had I gone to Officers' Training, in some respect, I would have at least had familiarization with grenade launchers, M-60s, machine guns, maybe some other weapons, probably a side-arm, a .45 or something.

So, I got to Vietnam, and everybody's carrying M-16s. Now, we did have familiarization firing when I was at Fort Holabird. We did, I think we technically qualified, something on our record, something bogus, but for the M-16. And in Intelligence School we actually also were qualified--we weren't qualified, we had familiarization firing—with .38s. I mean, nobody carries a .38-caliber. This is kind of a little bit of spy school crap.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: So, I go to Vietnam. I go up to Da Nang, and that's where they issued weapons. And most officers carry a side arm. They didn't give me a side arm. They weren't going to give me a side arm because I wasn't an officer. They wanted me to appear to be an officer, but they wouldn't give me one. So that was a contradiction that I ended up having to explain.

But the worst contradiction [laughs] was, they gave me an M-14. So I ended up in Quang Tri City carrying an M-14. Everybody else had M-16s, and so, guess what they thought I was? They thought I was a sniper.

Jim: [Laughs]

Paul: And it was just another thing to draw attention, and I didn't need that, I didn't want attention. And I thought, "What kind of outfit is this? They couldn't swap me out with somebody else and at least give me an M-16?" I don't care about the side arm. It makes no difference to me. But they give me an M-14, and I had more than one guy say, "Come on, tell us the truth. Because you're with that unit, and we know you guys aren't really signal people. We're not sure what you are. We think you're spooks," which was the slang term for Intelligence.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: But, you know, only snipers carry M-14s. So I failed to see the humor in it at the time, because it made me nervous.

Jim: Yeah, I can understand that.

Paul: And so, and so, that's the thing I most remember.

The other thing was, we-- You know, you're in the middle of a war zone, right? And Army regs say that you have to refamiliarize with certain weapons periodically. Well, for god's sake, you know, if you're stationed in Fort Campbell or you're stationed in Chicago, fine. But, right in the middle of the whole tour, they said, "You got to go out and fire." Well, it was a grenade launcher; it was an M-28 or 48 or something. I can't remember. It's the one that looks like a shotgun.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: So it's a little fragmentation. It's actually an interesting device.

And so we went outside, uh--we went south of Quang Tri with a bunch of enlisted and a bunch of officers, and they're having these guys fire these grenade launchers. I mean, and it was just taking potshots at bushes and stuff like that. It was nonsense. There was no, there was no formal thing to it. But I had never fired one. I didn't want to look foolish. And so there was a guy who said, "Sir, why don't you take a shot at that small bush over there?" And I said, "No. I'm fine with this stuff. You guys need to practice." I didn't want to shoot the thing. It was simply because I didn't want to look like I didn't know what the hell I was doing.

There's really nothing to them. They're like a 12-gauge with a single round.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: But, uh, you know--and there were guys sitting on an APC [Armored Personnel Carrier] firing .60-caliber into a berm[?]. I was very impressed. I'd never seen a .60-caliber up close. I was impressed with how much damage they could do just to dirt and foliage, to say nothing of human beings, buildings. And that was the other odd thing.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: So we got through that and went home and stopped playing cowboy. I think it was kind of a surrogate thing that people who weren't in the field thought they should do so they could feel a little more impressed about themselves.

Jim: Okay. What did you think of the leadership that you had there?

Paul: Uh, in Vietnam, very little--very little, indeed. Most of the true officers that I knew were simply putting in their time so they could have it on their resume for career advancement. I had two encounters with two majors, one in Da Nang and one up in Quang Tri City.

The difference in the Army Commendation Medal and the Bronze Star—and I say this very, I say this in a way not meaning to offend you or anybody who honestly earned those—is that they gave the ArCom, the ArmCom, whatever it was called, to enlisted, and for the same work they gave a lot of bronze stars for officers. And I was offended by that. We're talking about people working at a desk. We're not talking about people having to deal with running point, walking point, or whatever.

And, uh, so I was told by, uh—I was down in battalion headquarters in Da Nang one day, and the major called me in. I was only down there for a few days, and I don't even remember why. And he said, "We're going to put you in for a Bronze Star." And I, uh, I was actually stunned. And I was very anti-war. This was, like, in the last three or four months I was there, and I said, "Sir, if it's all the same to you, I don't want it." And, uh, he was upset. He was very upset.

He kicked me out of there, and I got on the plane, or the chopper, and I flew back. And when I was greeted by the other major [laughs] in Quang Tri City, who of course had found out about this by phone or something, and he, uh, read me the riot act for ten minutes. And then he said, "You'll write a letter of apology, and you will accept it whether you want it or not." So, uh, I thought it over, and I just said, "Screw it!" So I wrote a letter of apology. I don't even remember what I said, and I wish I'd kept a copy of it. But I never got the medal.

Jim: [Laughs]

Paul: I don't even know if I got the Army Commendation Medal. I think it screwed it all up, which was fine with me.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: I, I, the best guys I knew there, you know, in fairness, I had a lieutenant who served on the same team with me, but his attitude was the same. You know, maybe we were the same political ilk. We got along well. I got along well with most people, always have. But it was basically the senior, it was basically the field-grade officers who were pushy. And I just avoided them.

They were also a lot of, I would say, mostly captains there that I'd meet in the Officers' Club. There were a lot of them who were pretty--I was not gung-ho, let's put it that way, I didn't support it—and they were, some of them were borderline psychotic, I think. So I just stayed clear of those folks.

- Jim: Was the mission ever explained to you, what you were doing?
- Paul: The big picture, so to speak?
- Jim: Yeah--the big picture in Vietnam, I think I know what you're going to say about that--but what you were *supposed* to be doing in Quang Tri City?
- Paul: You know, it may have been, but I don't really think so. I don't think anybody bothered to take the time because nobody gave a damn. When I was in Da Nang when I first went up there, I really felt afield, because I was on my own. I didn't know any of the people. I was very impressed with the cavalier, give-a-damn attitude of most, even of the enlisted, who were in the battalion headquarters at Da Nang. They would get in the jeep at twelve o'clock and go across town to someplace to eat. I mean, it was where they served most of the food. They wouldn't look around and make sure everybody was accounted for. You got a ride. They'd just take off. They didn't give a damn whether they ran over you or left you out or not. And I felt like that was the whole attitude over there.
- So, no, I don't think I was every really briefed, except in the most peripheral, the most general, way about what I was supposed to be doing and how it was going to work. And I think maybe some of them didn't really know. They just kind of figured it out as they went along.
- Jim: Yeah. Was your training relevant to your experience in Vietnam?
- Paul: [Sigh] The language training should have been, but it wasn't. I actually spent the first month or two there actually trying to get better at the language. But I gave up on it, because it really wasn't necessary. We had an interpreter and, you know, you can get— If you want to turn somebody off when they're learning a language, you laugh at them if you're a native speaker. If you go to Paris and you try to apply your French and they laugh at you, you sort of withdraw. If you have somebody who says, "I'll work with you and help you with your struggle," it works differently. Well, they didn't have the sophistication, so I pretty much gave up on it.
- I did get an order from my superior. He said, "You *will* speak Vietnamese, and you *will* learn to translate, because we want to know if the interpreter—actually, what we want to know is--." When one of their key people would come in, bring in information, and they would battle amongst themselves, they wanted me to essentially spy on them, [unintelligible] counterparts, and tell our people what they were really saying, because they were paranoid. It wasn't about the intelligence, it was about the gossip. And I said, "I can pick up a few words, but I basically don't know enough to pick it up." Besides, they spoke four hundred miles an hour.

Jim: Oh, yeah.

Paul: And I didn't know the dialect. So the language training was borderline useful but not really.

The Intelligence Training I had gave me a perspective, but our Intelligence Training in Baltimore was about what I would call CIA-type operations--conventional spying and all of that. It wasn't about the military context for gathering information, which is entirely different.

And we weren't dispatching people. We weren't doing the debriefing, because we were at arm's length. They let the Vietnamese do the dispatching of a Vietnamese agent and the debriefing of a Vietnamese agent, except for that one experience that I mentioned.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: So it gave me a context and a background but, you know, we weren't trailing anybody. Had I been in the States, it would have been very useful. Had I been in West Germany, it would have been useful, or [in] London, it would have been useful: safe houses, fox-and-hounds.

Jim: So what you're saying is that the training showed that the military was even sort of resisting Vietnam. They were training you to fight in Europe, but the war was in Vietnam.

Paul: They could've spent six weeks at Holabird teaching me to do the same thing that took me nineteen weeks, and they could have oriented it toward Vietnam: jungle warfare, whatever. They could have done that, but they didn't. They wasted nineteen weeks there. They wasted forty-seven weeks in language school.

I should have been, there was actually a short course for officers in El Paso--if I recall; I may be making some of this up, but conceptually this is the way--I think it was, uh, five or six weeks long. Now that made sense. They give you enough, they give you some basics, and they say, "Get over there and start working." If I were going to learn French from nothing, and I had a language proclivity, I'd be better off getting six weeks of French and then being dropped into Paris to work with someone than spending a whole year here studying it in the lab.

And the irony was that when we were in El Paso, we were taught by native speakers. They were people over teaching us, and the attitude amongst all of us was, "Why is this captain"—he was a Vietnamese captain—"over here instructing us in Vietnamese so we can go over there and support the

American effort? Why isn't *he* over there?" Now, we're talking about a young, good-looking, healthy guy.

Now, we had a few older people. We had a few women, by the way, who were very good. That was different. But we had a young captain over there who spent forty-seven weeks with some of us. Nobody was managing the military effort.

Jim: Uh, okay. Did you go on R&R during your tour?

Paul: I did. They introduced a new policy while I was over there that actually allowed people to fly all the way back to the States instead of Australia or the Philippines or maybe Tokyo or Hawaii—were the main ones. I could have gone to those places. But I had the option of coming home for close to two weeks in June in the middle of my tour. I actually flew all the way back to Mount Horeb—to Madison to Mount Horeb—and—

Jim: I bet you didn't land in Mount Horeb [laughs].

Paul: Yeah, right on the north side of town there's this big runway.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: Uh, it was an awful, it was a wonderful trip back, but long. But it was an awful trip going back again. I mean, I've made that trip now about five times. It's just awful; it's the worst flight in the world. Even when you go over, if you just want to see Australia, it's just an awful trip.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: But I flew back, spent some time, and then I had to go back. And my wife had been teaching high school at Mount Horeb High School, and then the second semester. And I think she was dealing with it a lot worse than I was. I encouraged her to go back. She went back and got her master's degree in teaching the second half of my tour and graduated. So she could focus on something and do it instead of going in and trying to manage high school, teach high school students.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: So, I was glad I came home, but I think maybe it was even harder. I had another chance to go on R&R within the last three months. Basically, they said, "Look, if you want to take three days, go to Australia, whatever." We were short-staffed, and I felt like I just couldn't do it to people. There would have been, like, two in the office, so I just refused it.

Jim: Okay. How did you come home, then, from Vietnam?

Paul: I got a two-week drop. I was expecting to leave Vietnam the end of January, and about the tenth or eleventh of January I got orders that came in that said—in fact, I wasn't there. I was in the billet someplace in the area and then came back. And someone said, "Hey! You got orders. Get your stuff together. You're out of here." And I was, I was just shocked. I was shocked, not because—I was only two weeks away from leaving anyway. But, you know, it's like, you might be a millionaire in two weeks, and someone says, "Well, here's the million. Just take it."

And my roommate, whom I thought a lot of and liked and was a good friend, wasn't around. He was out flying around the DMZ someplace doing some naval intelligence work. And they just said, "The chopper's coming. You have, like, fifteen minutes." I just put my stuff together and got on the plane. Actually, I went out to the combat base. Bang, bang, I got on a, I think it was a C-130 or whatever it was, flew down to Da Nang and just like exploded out of Vietnam. I was there one day. I flew to Saigon, Long Binh. I was out-processed in two days, and by about the thirteenth or fifteenth of January I flew into Oakland, California.

Jim: Did you fly military or commercial?

Paul: It's the same situation. I think these were actually big orange—they weren't--you remember Braniff? [Laughs]

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: They weren't Braniff, but I think it was one of those big companies. I just remember the big, orange-painted jet.

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: And I never felt such elation in all my life as I did when—we were on the runway. They were taking occasional fire from someplace, and they just said, "This guy's going to come in. He comes in. He lands. They get everybody off. You get on, and you're gone. They're not going to screw around. So, it's like you've got five minutes." It was really and touch-and-go kind of operation. And I think it just happened to be the way it was that day, that morning.

We got on, and when those—you feel those wheels, and you felt, you know, you went down a runway, and when you lifted up, just, uh, the emotion on that plane was just overwhelming. It was like, it's like, "We're free." Now [laughs], you could crash in the Pacific, but that didn't matter. It was like, those wheels lifted up, and we're leaving this, this poor land,

and that's it. We're going back to Milwaukee[?], you know. It was just unbelievable. And the whole relaxation, the whole attitude, oh, it was just like a bunch of happy campers.

Jim: It was a little different than coming over.

Paul: Oh, God, yeah! Yeah, it was just unbelievable.

Jim: I forgot to ask you about on the way over. Did you know anybody on the plane on the way over?

Paul: Yeah, I was, um, I'm trying to think. I was with several of those guys I'd spent so much time with in Intelligence School, Language School. We were all in, uh, actually we were almost all together. It must have been fifteen of us, anyway, all the way into Long Binh. And then we started to disperse.

Jim: Right.

Paul: And I really never saw—the guy I ran into in Quang Tri, I hadn't gone to Language School with him. So I hadn't seen him for quite a while. But I never saw any of those guys again, with one exception. When I came back out of country, when I was out-processing, [laughs] there was a guy from Minnesota. I can see him clear as a bell. And we met up in Long Binh, and it was like, "Wow," you know? We just left, and then we're all back together, and I flew with him back to Oakland. I actually flew with him all the way to Chicago. Because we flew to Chicago, really, it was just the two of us. And he said goodbye, you know. I shook his hand, and I figured I'd see him now and then or keep in touch, but no, there you go. That was, what, thirty-five years ago?

Jim: Were you discharged from Oakland, then?

Paul: We were, for all intents and purposes. But we were uniformed until we got off the plane in Madison. I remember being confronted in San Francisco International Airport, whatever San Francisco's called.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: They sent us from Oakland with our money and our orders, and they sent us over to San Francisco airport to catch a flight to Chicago. And they warned us about this. They said, "Be careful. Don't mouth off to any MP you see there. Don't do anything, you know, like the single-finger salute, or *anything* that'll give them-- [End of Tape 1, Side B]

Jim: You were warned about you shouldn't confront the MPs. Did you have any problems with civilians?

Paul: No—you know, that's a—I never thought about that. San Francisco was, you know, a flower city, whatever. It was pretty much known for its anti-war feelings. But, you know, we got on the bus or cab, I don't remember, and we went over to the airport. I mean, it's all a hazy recollection. You got in the line, got our tickets, and, uh, you got your duffle bag and you're wearing Class A's. You got a tie on, but it was pretty loose. So, you know, our tie was loose, and we were looking, I think we didn't have our jackets buttoned, or whatever. Feeling really good.

And we did get confronted by a couple of MPs that said, "Straighten up!" You know, we bit our tongues and we did it. But once we got on the plane we got a little sloppy. And I left my friend Bruce in Chicago, and I transferred to—you know those old North Central Airlines--and got on the plane and flew via Milwaukee to Madison. And, the thing—in Long Binh it had probably been ninety-five degrees. And, you know, five days later--four days, three days, I don't know what days, I've lost track—I landed in Madison, and it must have been twenty below zero. I landed about eight o'clock at night, and it was howling, and it was unbelievable.

My mother-in-law picked up some long underwear for me. She knew I was coming back, and she said to her daughter, "You want to give this to your husband, because he's going to need this stuff." [Laughs] And it was such a physical shock. But I, I couldn't have cared less. I would have walked all the way home. It wouldn't have mattered to me. It was really a [pause] just incredible feeling, just to get off that plane and to take off the uniform and say, "I'm done. I'm never going to do this again."

The funny thing was, when they out-process you, as you know, they say, "Well, you're going to be in the—what?—Ready Reserve or something for so many years."

Jim: Yeah, like those guys right now.

Paul: We just laughed. We just said, "Yeah, right." You come back after me in the Ready Reserve, I'm in Canada, I'm whatever. It's like, yeah, that's the rule, but it isn't going to work that way.

Jim: Yeah. How were you received in Madison?

Paul: Well, you know, the war was turn-on, turn-off for I think a lot of people. I went into Service, you know, if you think about people in a small community, you're not aware where anybody is. When people go off to college, they're gone, so you lose track of them. Then you might hear

somebody's in Service. Nobody knew I was gone except my family. And when I came back I lived for a few months with my in-laws on the farm. Actually I lived more than that. It took me a long time to get a job—four or five months—and moved to Madison.

But I don't recall—you know, suddenly I'm a civilian again. And I remember one of the first days--this is post-Christmas, of course; you know, the month after, so there's January sales and all this stuff. I remember walking along the mall in Hilldale, and all I could see was Vietnam and Long Binh and all the poverty, all of the wretchedness of that life. And you're walking by this, this, it's just glitter. It's just, the wealth of--maybe it was the wrong, wrong mall, because at that time it was pretty much an upscale mall. But the wealth of this country, its infrastructure, how much it *has*, was overwhelming, almost to the point of angering.

And what bothered me was, the war was, of course, still going on, and it was really falling apart. So many people had died, so many more people were going to die, and pretty much people here were—yeah there was a political opposition to it--but it's pretty much turn-it-on/turn-it-off on it. I, it's like it never had happened, in a way.

Jim: How did the Vietnam experience affect your life?

Paul: Um, I've always regretted it. Um, I always felt that it was an unconscionable waste, personally and nationally--um, like bordering on criminal, quite honestly.

Uh, I, uh, I was hired, I spent nine months—this is ironic—but I spent nine months looking for a job, because unemployment rate's really high in early 1972. And I worked selling shoes part time while I was looking for work. I worked, I helped my father-in-law a little bit on the farm, although I wasn't any good at it because I didn't know anything about milking cows. I mean, in the spring, I could, I did a little disking or things that he could trust me with, but not much. Um, I worked in a meat factory. Uh, I, I decided to go back to school part time to try to draw the GI Bill. But I was just looking for *something* to get me through. And we were expecting. I had a daughter born in October of 1972.

And I got a job, finally, with the State of Wisconsin with the Department of Veterans Affairs, because I think they looked at my resume and they interviewed me. It was for a planning analyst's position and, perfectly honestly, I don't even remember applying for it. I was filling out so many things and sending them. I think my wife probably helped me fill it out. You drop things in the mail and you walk away, because it's so many turned down.

And they called me, and I was a Vietnam vet. I was young, bottom of the pay scale. They probably thought I would be empathetic to, uh, the programs that they were trying to institute regarding Vietnam veterans' benefits, particularly for returning Vietnam veterans. And they hired me. I was thrilled. You know, it was a permanent job with health benefits--although it wasn't in time for my first daughter. We just paid out of pocket for her.

Uh, so I took a job with an organization that kind of had a reputation for—it, it, it's the whole syndrome about traditional veterans' organizations. I worked for John Moses, and I needed the job and I respected what they were trying to do to help people who were plugging back into civilian life. But part of it went against my grain--but I had to--I just had to be practical about it.

Eventually I left that organization for a number of reasons. But one of them was, I couldn't stomach anymore the well-intended American Legion folks or VFW folks or AmVet folks who would show up at the Capitol supporting the veterans' programs, but who wore their garrison caps and were just regarded as a joke by people in the legislature. It's unfair, but, but part of it was, some of them did act like yahoos.

Jim: I know.

Paul: And it made it very hard. And I said, "You know, I believe that if a person comes back from any kind of service, particularly war service—I *particularly* believe this, I still believe this—if they have sacrificed physically, emotionally, uh, God forbid they've lost an arm--this is to say nothing of the dead, now; that's a whole different thing—that there *is* something they're owed. There's no question about that. And I don't have any problem with people getting disability pay for disfigurement, for wounds, for whatever. I have no problem with that at all.

What I do have is a problem with, with, uh, people like me, let's say, uh, a person simply put in their time, coming back saying, "But I always want something. I always want something. I always want something." Come back, get back into the stream, you're done. That's why I didn't want to consider myself a veteran. So I said, "I need to stop this. I need to work with people who are focused on general social programs and the good things the State of Wisconsin does. But I'm not going to spend my life cheering for creating another veterans' home or so forth."

So I walked away, and I was glad to be done with it. So, it was negative, Jim. I guess I'd have to say that.

Jim: Okay.

Paul: I have since come around to the people who have been there like me, like you, whomever, who say, “But we want to do something positive.” And if people will believe us a little more because we have some level of credibility because we’re veterans, and we can use that to leverage peace efforts, I will do that. That’s fine. But we’re not about, my organization is not about, veterans’ benefits, itself.

Jim: Okay, let’s talk about your organization, because one of the questions on the list [is], “Are you active in a veteran organization?”

Paul: Well, I’m active in the Madison Chapter of Veterans for Peace. Veterans for Peace is a national organization out of St. Louis of about five thousand members. Its purpose is to educate the American public about, essentially, the evils of war and to be a strong advocate, a *peaceful* advocate, for peace. And that means distributing literature. That means peaceful demonstrations. That means urging legislators or leaders to pursue peaceful means to support their political goals.

We are anti-war. Everybody says they’re anti-war. But if we’re all anti-war, then what are we doing again in an abysmal situation in Iraq? We are anti-war whether it’s a Democrat or it’s a Republican in the White House. We decry the enormous loss of life, damage to life. And we’ll do everything we can to work against the reoccurrence of these kinds of tragic international situations that we find ourselves in.

Our biggest thing, I think, that we do, I think the most important thing that we do, is something called counter-recruitment. Under the Americans, excuse me, under the No Child Left Behind Act--which happens to be in the current administration--and it’s probably under the rubric of jobs, job training and furthering education; it’s probably well-intended. But military recruiters are given automatic access to seniors in high school, to their records, so that they can call them and say, “You want to go to college, but you’re worried about paying for it. Why don’t you consider joining the National Guard or the Reserve or whatever?”

We like to counter that—in the first place, the perpetuation of people going into the military, and a lot of them having attitudes of, “There’s nothing wrong with war.” It’s found in young people, and it’s sold to young people by recruiters. So we go in to counter that. We go in to counter it to say, “Think about that before you make that decision. There are other ways to finance education. There are other ways to make money if you’re in an interim situation. You should think twice about—we think you should think twice about just signing up as though it really doesn’t matter. It’s just another part-time job.”

There are many, many—what? thirty/forty percent of the forces in Iraq—are Reserve or NGs. That makes no sense to me, to us. Why *they* are over there has nothing to do with national defense or Guard-type duties. I mean, we see them as having a legitimate purpose here in the States, whether it's in civil issues, natural disasters, even military police actions—even, you know, protecting property, protecting rights, protecting whatever.

So we do counter-recruitment, and I think that's probably our strongest thing. Again, we try to do it very gently. We don't get strident about it. We do encourage high school students to consider, and their parents to consider signing documents opting out of the No Child Left Behind provision, which simply says they *decide* if they want to have a recruiter call them, as opposed to recruiters' being given all those records.

Jim: It's kind of the "no-call" list in reverse.

Paul: That's right. And I haven't been as active in that as I maybe should be. We've done some of that, members of our group have, everywhere from Wisconsin Heights to Memorial, East High, La Follette, that sort of thing. We're trying to get young people to--this is very difficult--to think about choices. That's really what it comes down to. We don't indicate, and I don't think we believe, certainly I don't believe, that you simply don't need a military at all. That's not our belief. The military has its purpose, just like having a police force or a fire department has its purpose.

I would like to, personally, I'm involved in a huge project that we're trying to pull off, here, next April, and I'm in a fund-raising mode [laughs].

Jim: [Laughs]

Paul: And I would like to build some partnerships with, and get some support from, some of the traditional veteran's organizations. It's called—I don't know if this is the appropriate time to--?

Jim: Oh, it's fine. Just go ahead.

Paul: It's called, the short name, it's called the Purple Heart Project. I have arranged for a New York photojournalist--she happens to be stationed in New York. She's a photojournalist. She's done a lot of pictures: Bosnia, First Gulf/Persian Gulf War, and the current war. She takes pictures of the effect of war, not on the battlefield, but of people, veterans, who come back dealing with the physical and emotional wreckage that they have.

She's done a book called *Purple Hearts: The Return from Iraq*. And I saw pictures from the book in a photo magazine. I'm a photographer. And I

was so impressed with them that I got in touch with her, and I said, “Do you think we could bring you to Madison, just to talk about your book and your project and why you did it and how you did it?” Because it’s a very tough book--twenty veterans, nineteen men and one woman, Iraq veterans, most of them are eighteen to twenty-four years old. There’s a couple are thirty-five-, thirty-six-, thirty-seven-year-olds. I said, “Just so people, you know, we do a public lecture.” She has a ten-minute film. Put together some discussion. I said, “I think it would be edifying for the community to really understand what war does to people.”

And besides, these people have been victimized, whether it’s by bad leadership or whatever, or sold a bill of goods. They are dealing with some wreckage for the rest of their life, and they deserve something for that. These are people who suffered and then--. They aren’t the dead; they are at least buried.

So she indicated she’d come. And she said, “You know, if you want, I can bring a photo show,” because she’s done a major exhibit. So we’re trying to bring her. It’s a money question, not a wanting-to-do-it question. We have a photo venue picked out in town where there’ll be a show for thirty days. We have a public venue where she would come and do a lecture, a discussion group. In fact we’ll have a panel, a humanities-type panel.

Jim: What’s the lady’s name?

Paul: Her name is Nina Berman: n-i-n-a Berman, b-e-r-m-a-n.

Jim: The reason I’m asking—

Paul: I wish I’d brought my stuff along, because I’m the project leader on this. And I’ve got to raise--quite honestly I need raise between eight and ten thousand dollars, because it’s just the cost of shipping that show and you start to add everything in, and the publicity, and it ends up being that much.

Jim: Okay.

Paul: I have actually been in touch with someone with the American Legion Auxiliary, somebody I know personally. And I said to this woman, I said, “You know, what do you think of this? Do you think it’d be possible?” I’d love to find a VFW or an American Legion group who says--. You know, this isn’t going to be an anti-Bush Administration tirade. It may be taken by people that way. But this says, “Just look at the cost of this. And how do we prevent--how do, how do we not do things like this in the future?”

These pictures are taken almost like formal portraits--sitting on a bed, whatever. She, she, uh--. I mean, they're obviously taken with the full agreement of these twenty veterans. And they're, uh, they're heart-rending. They're heart-rending photos.

And most of these kids—I went through and I read the interviews--and I would say seventeen out of twenty said, “We went to Iraq. It was the right thing to do.” So these aren't anti-war guys at all. There's a few of them who are, they're in the first year of their shock. They're too close to it. There's a few who say, “I don't know now. Maybe this was [laughs] the wrong direction to go.” And, uh, it's just, it's very thought-provoking. And I guess it's about education.

And, I mean, as a photographer she's done a terrific job. She's written this book, and I think it'll be good for the community. I don't think there's anybody, whether it's right or left, who wouldn't look at these people and have sympathy for them and say, “Let's talk about how can we avoid this kind of result?”

Because these, when you look at a twenty-year-old—I mean, there's a kid from Milwaukee, Alan Germaine Lewis [?], now I don't think we can get him in with this group, I don't know. These are really young, inexperienced kids. And most of them are high school educated. Some of them come from very tough socio-economic circumstances. He's sitting there on the edge of his bed, it's really depressing. He's got two titanium legs. He was blown out of a Humvee. You know, what do you say in a situation like that? Um, it's very evocative.

And I'd love to have support in any kind of way, in-kind or even a little cash support, from some traditional groups where people would say, “Vets for Peace actually reached out to a VFW club, to an American Legion group, and we both say, ‘Look, we basically all believe the same thing, and let's have a constructive, peaceful, educational discussion on this.’” I don't know if I can get there or not, but I'm working on that sort of thing.

Jim: Okay. Have your Vets for Peace, your membership, are they involved with any things like the Vets Centers, where they're being counseled for whatever damage has been done to them?

Paul: I think the Vets for Peace folks that are in the group that I knew are, if you will, sort of beyond that. They've come to terms with their past. Some of them are strident in their anti-war—and let me tell you, clearly politically they have very clear feelings. We are not a partisan group, because we can't be as a 501-C3. We're nonprofit, and to maintain that status we have to walk a line.

But I don't think, uh, do some of them suffer after-effects from Vietnam? Yeah, I think they do. They're all over the board. My friend Mike Boehm would probably, he'd sit here for four/five/six hours talking about stuff. Part of that is that it's mixed in with his experience there as well as his own makeup. You know, I, I—the most, I don't know. We have everybody from people who never got out of the States but have clear political feelings, a clear anti-war, anti-machine/militarism feelings, to—

Uh, one of our most impressive speakers was a guy named Sid Podell [Sidney B. Podell: 8/16/1920-2/22/2009]. He's an attorney. He had a practice in Milwaukee. Sid is about eighty-four, I think. And I heard him speak to a group. There were a bunch of us speaking to a group who just wanted to know about us and our experience. He flew some of the bombers, B-29s or whatever, when they fire-bombed Japan prior to the big one. And it turns out I had just read a book by James Bradley called *Flyboys* [full title: *Flyboys: A True Story of Courage*].

Jim: Yeah.

Paul: And I read the book because somebody gave it to me, not because I went looking for it. And I thought I would not particularly like it. And I was totally impressed by what he wrote. I mean, it's, you know, it's a book that's as anti-war as anything can be, because it steps back and looks at the barbaric treatment of Americans of Japanese and vice-versa, *very* much. It says, "This is war. There is not a damn thing about it that has any glory or any heroic nature. It's awful."

You know the heroism that you read about and that I can understand and believe is the one-on-one. It's me next to you in the field and what I'll do for you or you do for me. That's heroic. But it has nothing to do with this whole thing called war. It has to do with love and friendship.

Jim: Uh huh.

Paul: And so Sid sat in those bombers, and he told this group about stuff. And they said, "Sid, you must have written--." He had read, he knew about the book, but it was exactly what the guy had written about in the book. I was just very impressed.

Jim: You know, he's from Wisconsin.

Paul: Bradley is? Is that right?

Jim: And his dad was. He wrote another book called *Flags of Our Fathers*, and his dad was one of the flag-raisers on Iwo Jima.

- Paul: Maybe I remember that now that you mention that. But, uh, it was a very researched book. I was very impressed by it. And so we have Sid Podell, who flew in B-29s—I don't think they were 25's, but whatever--over there.
- Jim: I don't think so.
- Paul: And we have people during Vietnam who never got out of the States, and we have everything in between. We have Korean War veterans; we have just a bunch of stuff. And, uh, I don't think any of them are in counseling. I mean, I think we have people who did the drug scene, and their minds are mush. We have everything, and so I don't know what's what. [Laughs]
- Jim: Okay. Have we covered everything we should cover about your Vietnam experience and all?
- Paul: Oh, I think so. I think so. I will just say as an afterword, I ran into Mike Boehm—I read about Mike Boehm and his Vietnamese-American Peace Park Projects in about 1995 through, it was a feature article in the paper. And he was looking for people to go back, for any reason they wanted to, for personal grief, or whatever it was that would bring them back. And I said to my wife, "This guy is doing this great work. Maybe I should go back, not because I went through anything particularly traumatic there." Far be it.
- Jim: Yeah.
- And I got to know Mike and I went back with him and about ten/twelve other guys, and some of them are there from all over the country. Some of them had horrible combat experience, Jim, right up in the area where I was, except they were out in the boonies. And it was tough, because the country is so poor. And it was tough because you're shoved back into—it's a Third World country, but it's grim. We stayed in an old part of the city.
- At any rate, I've maintained a friendship and gotten to know Mike a lot since then. He goes back every year. He takes money back, and he builds schools, and he tries to repair damage. He's taken that on as, like, his mission for life. It's because he feels he was part of this, this very wrong period in history. I feel the same way. I don't go back with him; I can't do that. I have to do other things. So I guess I'm trying to do what little I can.
- Jim: Yeah. Good. Well thank you very much, Paul.

[End of Interview]