

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
THOMAS LEE TABER
Stenographer, Army, 54th Field Artillery Battalion, Vietnam War
1997

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Taber, Thomas Lee, (b.1947) Oral History Interview, 1997.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 90 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract

Thomas Lee Taber, a Platteville, Wisconsin native discusses his two tours of duty with the Army's 54th Field Artillery Battalion as a stenographer during the Vietnam War. Studying for a year at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville before enlisting in the Army in October 1966, Taber discusses the eight weeks he spent at Fort Jackson in Columbia (South Carolina) for basic training in which he marched, drilled, and learned how to fire the M-14 rifle. Taber then talks about his experiences at Fort Ben Harris in Indianapolis (Indiana) where he attended stenographer school. He tells of his initial reactions when stepping off a C-40 Starlifter into Vietnam and eventually being stationed in Long Binh, northeast of Saigon. Stationed across the road from the 18th Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), he describes the characteristics of that outfit as well as speaking about the weaponry that was commonly used by the 54th Field Artillery. He describes his working environment and social life on the base. He talks about drug and alcohol usage as well as race relations between the men. Awakened by the advance of the North Vietnamese onto his base during the Tet Offensive, Taber expresses his feelings about Tet, the politics of the day, and his attitude toward his service at the time. He touches upon his homecoming, his education at UW-Platteville, and speaking to students about his service in Vietnam. Taber analyzes the differences between the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and tells how he obtained a job at the Wisconsin Department of Veteran's Affairs.

Biographical Sketch

Taber (b.1947) served in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969 as a stenographer with the Army's 54th Field Artillery Battalion. He received the Purple Heart and Bronze Star and returned to Platteville, Wisconsin following his military service.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1997

Transcribed by Jennifer Stake, Wisconsin Court Reporter, 2005.

Transcription edited by Damon Bach, 2005.

Interview transcript

- Mark: Okay. Today's date is Wednesday, August the 27th, 1997. This is Mark Van Ells, archivist, Wisconsin Veteran's Museum, doing an oral history interview this afternoon with Mr. Thomas Taber, veteran of the Vietnam Conflict from Grant County, Wisconsin. Good morning—it is morning still, right?
- Taber: It's still morning.
- Mark: Thanks for coming in. Why don't we start by having you tell me a little bit about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to your entry into the military.
- Taber: Okay. I was born in Cuba City, Wisconsin, and we lived there for about eight years. And we moved to Fennimore, Wisconsin, where we lived for five years, and then moved back to Platteville, where I finished high school. And then I spent a year at that time in Wisconsin College System.
- Mark: At Platteville?
- Taber: Not UW Platteville, no. And I was working part-time at the Gamble's Store there in Platteville and said I put a year in at the at the university mainly because we lived across the street from the school and wasn't sure that—really where I wanted to go from there, and that was—I graduated from high school in '65.
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Taber: And so I just felt I didn't want to go back to school at that point in time in my first year.
- Mark: Now, as a student, you had a draft permit, so it wasn't—
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: I don't imagine that that was a—the so-called draft mode of— (Unintelligible.)—enlistment—
- Taber: No.
- Mark: —a period of time. I'm—I'm interested—well, may—before we get to your enlistment, you know, we—I live and work in Madison, and Madison had a reputation during this period of being a hotbed of antiwar activity and that sort of thing and—

- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: —was in the headlines all the time. Was Platteville, UW Platteville, was it a much different situation? I mean, what was sort of the mood on campus there?
- Taber: I'm looking at my father, because he was a police officer at the time in Platteville.
- Mark: I didn't remember that.
- Taber: Um, actually when—that first year that I went to school, I don't think it was too anti anything. It was small school, you know, 3,000 students max. Real conservative, small-town atmosphere. After I got into the service, they had two weeks worth of marches and riots and trying to burn fire trucks and that kind of thing. (Unintelligible.)
- Mark: At Platteville?
- Taber: At Platteville.
- Mark: What sparked that, do you know?
- Taber: Um, part of it supposedly was civil rights, racial, and part of it was just general student unrest and antiwar, and I think it was just ripe for it to happen.
- Mark: Yeah. But you were gone by then?
- Taber: I was in Indianapolis at training at that time, yeah.
- Mark: So when it came time for you to make the decision to leave school and join the military—I guess what I'm getting at is what—what prompted you to make that decision? I mean, there was a war on and you knew it—
- Taber: Yeah.
- Mark: —at the time, I imagine.
- Taber: I think actually a couple things. One, as you said, a war on and I guess there was sufficient patriotism there to feel that that's where I should be. If we—we felt we needed to be over there, that's where I should be.

Mark: Was it something that you discussed with your father?

Taber: Nope.

Mark: I know that he was a military guy so—

Taber: I'll background this a little bit. When I was seven or eight, I had rheumatic fever, which laid me in the hospital for six weeks, and wasn't allowed to do any physical activity, which included getting into phy ed in high school and college and all of that stuff. So I had a lot of unresolved physical kind of things that I kind of felt I needed to—to address, and the military was one way of doing that.

Growing up in the '50s when there were military aircraft flying all over the place for training and whatnot, it was something that piqued my interest. And that's really what I wanted to do was probably get into flying.

Mark: Well, the '50s was also the height of the cold war.

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: Did that play much of a factor? I mean, the stopping communism and all this kind of thing, is that something you were conscious of?

Taber: No, I really don't think so. I don't remember the atomic bomb drills or any of that stuff. I suppose we did that, but I don't recall that.

Mark: So you entered the service?

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: Why don't you just walk me through your induction process. Now, I understand, I imagine you had to get a physical, report somewhere and then it's on to basic training.

Taber: Actually, I went twice. In April of '66, I thought I would check into it. I went down and saw a recruiter. And he said, "Don't even want to talk to you until you do the tests." And went into Milwaukee to the AV station down on Water Street, got all the written tests and the physical and all that. And he called me when he got everything back. And walked in down there, and he says, "Well, you can do anything you want except fly," because of my glasses. Everything, all the scores, he said, "You can do anything that you want to do." And, well, I was going to think about it, because I was still in school at that time.

worked through the summer and decided I really didn't want to go back to college, made that choice, and then just really didn't know where I wanted to go from there. I went back and saw the recruiter, and said, "Okay, I'm ready." Still kind of wanted to get into aviation somewhere along the line,

but my mother convinced me that clerical, finance or something like that would probably be the safest way to go, and so that's what I—I signed up for.

Mark: So you were able to sign up for that when you went in?

Taber: Yeah. Actually, we got three choices through the—well, through the army recruiter. I don't know what the other ranks were, but we had first, second, and third choice. And I—he happened to have a guy who was going to school at—at UW Platteville from Beloit that was going to stenographer school. And because I had expressed an interest in personnel or whatever, he said, "Hey, we can put you guys together. We'll go delayed entry." And so I put that down as first choice, and then finance was second and aviation electronics was my third choice. When I walked out the door, as soon as I hit the street I thought, "Well, you idiot. You should go back and do aviation electronics," because that in my mind would probably be a better career choice.

Mark: So—

Taber: But I didn't do it.

Mark: —to interrupt for a second, joining the service, now, one of your goals was to get some sort of training then?

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: For the—after—

Taber: I think so.

Mark: —the military experience?

Taber: Uh-huh. To have something to fall back on and—and, again, kind of to—to get over the rheumatic fever thing.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Taber: And that kind of surprised me when I went in for that first visit, though, because I told the doctors, and they just blew it off. Actually, when I was in the service, the unit I wound up with, there were three of us that as kids had rheumatic fever. So it didn't seem to be a big thing to them as it was when we were going through that as kids.

Mark: Yeah. Now, I would imagine 1967 they were looking for infantrymen. Was that mentioned to you by the recruiter at all?

Taber: No.

Mark: Or how—that subject ever come up?

Taber: No. And as I said, he told me he didn't want to talk to me until he took the scores. And then when they came back, he said I could do anything. What did I want to pick? And I did. And pretty much the people that were in my class in school went that way, too. And more I think enlistments than there were people being drafted.

Mark: So it's off to basic?

Taber: Off to basic. Off to—off to Milwaukee and getting stuck on an airplane that didn't want to run. The rumor was if you went by airplane, you were going to Fort Jackson; if you went by train, you were going to Fort Leonard Wood. So we got off to Mitchell Field, and we were on an airplane going to Fort Jackson. They had mechanical problems at the latest I think till like 11 o'clock at night, then we flew out. It was commercial aircraft, went to Columbia, South Carolina, got in down there at Fort Jackson around two o'clock in the morning.

Mark: Which was Savannah, Georgia, if I'm not mistaken.

Taber: No, it's above Savannah. It's Columbia, South Carolina.

Mark: I stand corrected. Shows what I know. And so what sort of training did you do then?

Taber: That was basic down there.

Mark: So this is the—

Taber: So they—they dumped us all off and put us in the cattle trucks and hauled us around, got our heads all shaved and came out and couldn't recognize anybody at 2:30, three o'clock in the morning, and kind of had to see who found who first. I think we got about two hours sleep before they actually started moving us around.

Mark: And basic training at this time lasted how long?

Taber: Still eight weeks.

Mark: Eight weeks.

Taber: Uh-huh.

- Mark: And what sort of training was it? I mean, you were going into clerical; were you mixed in with GIs and the regular infantry people and the reservists?
- Taber: Yep. For basic everybody was the same. In fact, you mention reservists, half of my basic training company was national guard and reservists from New Jersey and New York. And they were doing their basic training and then going to go back. And so we had kind of the same mix as you would in the World War II outfit, where we had the young guys that were drafted and enlistees, and we had some older people that were in guards and reserve.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Taber: And all do the same thing, all did the for the first week drills, marching, getting your equipment, all of that kind of thing, and familiarization with M-14s.
- Mark: Yeah, you weren't training with broomsticks at your time.
- Taber: We weren't training with broomsticks. M-14s, which were a little bit heavier.
- Mark: Any sort of adjustments you had to make to the military life?
- Taber: Biggest adjustment for me, again, was the physical part of it, because I didn't do any of that. I was a weakling as a kid, you know, play some catch up football once in a while, but I wasn't supposed to be doing that. So the physical part of it was the biggest. We had vacationed in different areas, so I was familiar with different parts of the country and the way people spoke and that, so I didn't have any trouble—
- Mark: Yeah.
- Taber: —adjusting to it that way.
- Mark: What was the physical regimen? I mean, in the Air Force, it was—when I was in, it was a couple push-ups and sit-ups and really nothing rigorous. The army is a little more—
- Taber: Little different.
- Mark: Had to be a little more rigorous at that time.
- Taber: A little different. A lot of calisthenics in the morning, push-ups, sit-ups, jumping jacks, that kind of thing. A lot of running as a group. I had the misfortune or fortune of being in six platoon, which was always at the end.

And if you watched that kind of maneuver, the first guys are always in step and doing the right pace. The second platoon lags a little bit in span and third one lags a little bit more and the fourth one. So sixth platoon got to run every place because we were always having to catch up, so our outfit actually did a lot of running. Obstacle courses, what they called confidence course, swinging from ropes and climbing ladders and jumping off of things and crawling over ditches, that kind of stuff.

Mark: Eight weeks you said?

Taber: Uh-huh.

Mark: And then it's off to some sort of technical training after that?

Taber: Yep. Didn't get a leave. Some people got a leave immediately after basic, and we didn't. Jim Tuller(??) was the gentleman from Beloit at that time, and he and I went to the army adjutant general school at Fort Ben Harrison, Indianapolis. We went right up there.

Mark: And this I'd imagine was kind of a classroom like—

Taber: Pretty much all classroom. I think twice a week that we actually had to go do calisthenics. And that really didn't happen until we got our career infantry NCO that came in and decided we were all a bunch of soft administrative people. At Indianapolis it was all branches of service, too.

Mark: Yes.

Taber: Air force, navy, army and marine corps people all together. Again, there my unit—in fact, that one mostly was reservist and national guard units along with us regular army people. And those people were from Texas. So they were finishing, had done their basic, came to Indianapolis and then they were going back to Texas.

Mark: And this training lasted how long?

Taber: From the end of March to July.

Mark: So you—when you signed up—I should have covered this before—was it a two-year enlistment, three, four, how—what kind—

Taber: Three.

Mark: —of enlistment did you have—(Both talking at once.)
Taber: I took a three.

- Mark: The thought of going to southeast Asia, had that occurred to you?
- Taber: Probably, yeah.
- Mark: Do you recall any specific thoughts; "I want to go, I don't want to go"—
- Taber: I—
- Mark: —"I'll take my chances"?
- Taber: Well, not that I'm anti Europe, but I had no desire to go to Europe. And, again, on the—somewhere along the line, we had to—to fill out a form where you wanted to be stationed.
- Mark: The green sheet, as I recall.
- Taber: Yeah, the green sheets. And I put all—partly 'cause dad was there—Pacific, you know, I wanted to see where he'd been and Philippines and whatnot. So I had Japan and—I didn't specifically put down Vietnam, because the rumor was if you put that down, you weren't going to go because they thought you were nuts.
- Mark: Really?
- Taber: Yeah.
- Mark: Hmm. That was the rumor?
- Taber: That was the rumor.
- Mark: Is there any—any substance to that in your experience?
- Taber: So if you really wanted to go, you didn't put it down, but—
- Mark: Any substance to that, in your experience?
- Taber: Well, it must have—
- Mark: Just out of curiosity.
- Taber: —must have—must have worked for me, because now—not really. They—out of the guys at Fort Ben, out of the 12 of us, six went to Vietnam, two stayed state side, one for paratrooper training and the other

one just had an assignment here. The only married guy went to Saudi Arabia. And the rest of them went to Germany. So it was pretty—you know, better than a 50-50 chance that you were going to go over there anyway.

Mark: So after you finished your—your training at—at Indiana, you must have gotten some leave and then it was off to Vietnam; correct?

Taber: Had a two-week leave, then came back and off to Oakland. Spent three(?), four days there before they finally decided where I was going. Actually, out of Indianapolis, I was supposed to go to Fort Meade, Maryland, to a missile outfit that was there. And they disbanded the unit the day I got my orders. So I was stuck in Indianapolis for a week and a half while everybody else got shipped out waiting to find me a place, and then I think they just kind of said, "Everybody's going; throw him that way."

Mark: And so you ended up going to Vietnam?

Taber: Uh-huh.

Mark: What were your thoughts or expectations before you went? What did you expect to see?

Taber: Don't think I had a clue. I really wasn't expecting anything in particular, other than maybe we were going to get shot at somehow in the line of duty.

Mark: Was that, uh, frightening or exciting or both, do you remember?

Taber: Uh.

Mark: And that's hard to remember. I'm—(Unintelligible.)

Taber: Uh, my philosophy all the way through was nobody is shooting at me personally, you know. And I think that's more of the attitude I took into this. It was a job kind of thing and—well, in basic training you're—they dehumanize everything by once we get nukes and Japs and whatever, because you're shooting a target, you're dealing with a target, you're not dealing with a person. And, you know, I just carried that to the extreme maybe and decided it wasn't anything personal, just do your job and be done.

Mark: Now, your father went overseas on a troop ship, I'm imagining. Did much of—

Taber: Nope.

- Mark: Take me through the—the transportation—
- Taber: Oh.
- Mark: —to Vietnam.
- Taber: Bad—bad news. One thing you didn't ask was—yet, you haven't asked, is how people responded to the military. I've got to tell that because that's part of it. When I came home on my first leave, I took a bus into Dubuque, Iowa. And all of the phones there—I didn't tell them I was coming home. All the phones at the bus station were busy, so I walked about four blocks to the post office, which I knew had a phone. And I got the weirdest looks because I was in uniform, dress uniform at that point.
- Mark: This is before you went over?
- Taber: Uh-huh. And that was—I think that was the first inkling that I had that maybe being in the military wasn't a good thing, just there was—
- Mark: Looks of what? Looks of—
- Taber: They—
- Mark: —dislike or disbelief or—
- Taber: Yeah, like—like, "What's this weird guy doing," "What's somebody in uniform doing here," "What's he up to," that kind of—you know, "Don't—don't associate with him, leave him alone," kind of—
- Mark: Not something you anticipated?
- Taber: No. Not at all. No. But after that it didn't throw me. And even when I was out in Oakland, a lot of my cohorts tell me that they ran into people that gave them problems, and I never had any of that. This thing in Dubuque is really the only problem I ever had.
- At Oakland, we were there with a million other guys in a bay area with bunks. And every morning you'd come in and call off names, and those were the people that were going that particular day. Those of us that didn't get called to get to go that particular day got assigned either to the mess hall or quartermaster or somebody there on post. And we helped load vehicles and whatnot. I think I was there three days. And then they bussed us up to Travis Air Force base in military buses and showed us this nice I think United 707 sitting on the—on the runway and said, "Okay, this is your plane; you're going," and marched out right underneath it and got into national guard C-40 Starlifter with all the seats facing the rear on the cargo doors and with no windows in it.
- We had storms all the way. And then flew to Alaska. That was our first

stop, took a kind of roundabout way, which was cold, even though it was August. And then we flew to Midway and had to stop there because the radar went out. That was in the middle of a typhoon at night. And we couldn't leave the terminal. And then when they finally got that fixed, something else happened, and we had to stop at Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines and sat there for five or six hours till they fixed the plane again, then we flew into Bien Hoa.

And everybody pretty much was sick on the aircraft at least once or twice, because of the weather and—

Mark: That was a pretty long-about route.

Taber: Yeah, that was a real long trip.

Mark: So, you know, in the Oliver Stone film *Platoon*, it opens up while they're getting off the plane, and he says something—(Unintelligible.) Do you recall getting off the plane and just—just sort of an introduction to the country?

Taber: What I recall is as—we must have been getting close. Again, there's no windows, so we had no idea where we were. But they made an announcement that inbound aircraft were taking small arms fire. And so that we should be prepared that when we landed to head wherever they told us to go, which was impossible because all of our duffel bags and everything was at the end of the plane where we had to get out, and we had to put that first, so, um, they opened those big cargo doors, and they dropped down that ramp, and then they took all of our baggage off, and then just said, "Okay, here you are." And it was a bright, sunshiny, quiet nice place, a lot of helicopters and other aircraft going on, but nothing real exciting at that point. And they broke us down a little bit and took us over to Long Binh base. And then from there we were broken down to what unit were going to go to. And that was, oh, about three miles from Long Binh was where our personnel section was.

Mark: So it took you how long to get to your unit? A couple days?

Taber: A couple days is all. When I got in country I think I only stayed down at Long Binh for a day, and then we got over, loaded the helicopter in the morning and took off. They took me out.

Mark: The 54th field artillery, that's Xuan Loc?

Taber: X-u-a-n L-o-c, yeah.

Mark: Now, where is that precisely? Which corps is that in, that's II Corps, isn't it? Is it?

Taber: Second field force. It's—it's actually in the Saigon area.

Mark: Oh, is it?

Taber: It's Long Bihn—Long Khanh province, which is north and east of Saigon, right on Highway 9(??) and actually it was, I found out later, the spot of the first communist attack. And it was the last provincial capital to fall at the end of the war.

Mark: Um, and so why don't you just—why don't you just sort of set the scene for me, that you're at base camp, I imagine, artillery—

Taber: Uh-huh.

Mark: —is standard.

Taber: The 54th had gone over as a unit, and they had been in Georgia, also. And they had gone over on ship, and I was one of the—they had gone over the year before. And I was one of the first replacements in there. When they got over there, because of the way we rotated out on a one-year tour, they didn't want the whole unit going down at one time. So they broke the whole thing up. And then they brought in people from other units so we had a couple people going every week or so through the whole outfit. And I was one of the initial replacements in there. Nice little garden kind of compound, fenced off with concertina and nice wooden slat buildings with screening and doors and electricity.

Mark: Now, the artillery didn't move, I don't think, if we look in the archives(??).

Taber: No. Actually, I was with the headquarters, the headquarters company. And so we supervised everybody else, had the 7th of the 8th, 7th of the 9th, 1st of the 83rd, and 2nd of the 35th were our fire lieutenants.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Taber: And that was everything from 105 TOTs(??) to 8 inch and 175. So the whole 1st of the 83rd was down the road from us, and they had the 8 inchers and the 175s, and that was pretty stable there. Across the street from us was headquarters for the 18th ARVN, which is a South Vietnamese, and then we had headquarters for one of the self-propelled units and the firing battery on the north side of—(Unintelligible.)

Mark: And if I understand their mission correctly, they would be static, but they would provide support for infantry units in the field.

Taber: What we did was stayed put, and they would get a sighting or a call for a fire mission, go all the way through channels. Our headquarters would approve it, go all the way back to the fire battery, and then they would lob the shells, 10, 15, 20 miles away to whatever it was they were supposed to hit.

- Mark: Yeah, they had quite a range for many of those guns.
- Taber: Yeah.
- Mark: So it was a pretty static base there?
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: I'd imagine there were South Vietnamese nearby?
- Taber: Right across the street was the infantry outfit, and then the village was basically all around us.
- Mark: Well, let's talk about the—(Unintelligible.)—the ARVNs first of all.
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: Talking to vets, you get sort of a mixed reaction about the ARVNs, whether or not they were effective or whatever the case may be. What was your impression?
- Taber: The 18th, I think, was good; you know, the guys across the street. I never was involved in anything with them, other than the Tet Offensive. Very, very disciplined people. You know, I didn't notice that they had any problems with defections or anything like that. And we always got along very well with them. Our—our main gates were opposite each other on either side of the street. And occasionally for recreational amusements, we would deal with them directly. But otherwise we weren't—because they were infantry, and we were headquarters, we didn't necessarily have to deal with them. The civilians in the area, we were good income for 'em. I don't know that we had any problems with them at our particular—
- Mark: So a fairly amicable relation?
- Taber: Yeah. Yeah.
- Mark: The guns, how often were they fired, just from your observer standpoint?
- Taber: It depend—
- Mark: They were shelling all the time.
- Taber: Yeah. It depended. We would notice the—the eight-inchers and the 175 mainly because they were closer and they were bigger. And the 175s have a sonic boom, so it was a double bang. You hear them firing and you hear

it go over. A couple times a day they might just to five or six rounds, or they might fire for a half hour in the evenings a lot because that's supposedly when people were moving in our direction. They would do that. You could hear B-52 bombings at night, too. It'd be 30, 40 miles up.

Mark: Yeah. And so your duties at this time, I mean, you're in an office somewhere?

Taber: I'm in an office somewhere.

Mark: Why don't you just describe your workstation.

Taber: My MOS was as a stenographer. I think they had no idea what to do with me. Shorthand wasn't necessarily a critical army skill, and that's why I was working headquarters. So I was assigned actually as a secretary for the executive officer, which also trickled down to being a backup driver, which included guard duty and that kind of thing. They tended not to let me off the base. We were in a long wooden structure with concrete floor, screened walls, as I said you had slatted or baffled. It's tin roofs, you know, the post and rail, wire electricity into it. I don't recall if we had electric typewriters. We had manual typewriters, a military phone system, bunkers at the end of the building, that kind of thing.

Mark: So you could be working at your desk when the artilleries coming flying?

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: That's what I'm—that's what I'm getting at.

Taber: Uh-huh. Yeah.

Mark: That would be sort of strange—

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: —all that constant artillery. It's not like working in a regular office necessarily.

Taber: Not quite. In fact, you—you're asking the same question. They did have some public relations people come around and interview us, mainly for Christmas, things to send home. And they—the guy asked me that at that point, "What do you think about this? Does it ever bother you?" And just as I went to answer, they fired off a volley. So there's a gap in the—in that tape, wherever that may be. But you got used to it. It wasn't something that was a distraction. You just got used to being there. And you went, "Oh, there must be somebody moving someplace if we—we're firing them."

- Mark: In terms of your daily routine then, you work seven hours a day or did you get weekends off?
- Taber: We pretty much had weekends off. **[End of Tape One, Side One]** Get up at six, we'd have a--everybody get together for a head count, and depending on who was in charge that particular day, whether we did it very well or just said we were there and went out, had a breakfast, showered whatever, and went in to--to do basically an office routine, typing orders and doing records, whatever might need to be done that day. Lunch was real routine—routine at noon. Be done at 4:30, five o'clock.
- Mark: I don't imagine your accommodations and various entertainment outlets were nearly as spartan as your father's were in World War II. Why don't you just describe that. I'd imagine there was a—almost a club or television and that kind of thing. Why don't you describe sort of social habits.
- Taber: There was Armed Forces Radio and Armed Forces Television. We had televisions, mainly in the M clubs. I don't know—some guys did eventually buy a small TV that they would have in the hootch, but that was rare at that point. And we had a library on post. We had movies occasionally. We had a theater, a basketball court, volleyball. Not enough room for baseball or a soccer field. Had enough room there to play some football, but—
- Mark: Were you able to have much contact with folks back home and to sort of keep in—keep at—keep abreast of the newspapers and the headlines and that sort of thing? Were you able to follow the war, I guess?
- Taber: Yeah. Mainly through the Armed Forces Radio that a lot of news on there, taken for however propagandized or censored you wanted to be.
- Mark: Well, what—what did people put—
- Taber: I think it was fairly accurate. It was obviously swaying it our way that things were going different and—and there were—I can't think of anything specific, but I know there were times when they would say something was going on, and we would know that it was a little bit different or quite a bit different than what they were reporting. We had *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, and we could get other papers in there. Mail in and out was no problem. It went fairly easily getting back in a couple days either way.
- A lot of us got to instead of writing would use tapes, bought a tape recorder and send tapes back and forth, fairly easy communicating back. And then you could always send for emergency messages through Red Cross and the MARS system, which was a ham radio network, if you could get it the right time, get in on that and they could make the connections back to somebody in your neighborhood or your community to—to get on the phone, and you could do that. I never personally did that. It was possible to do it.

- Mark: Were you able to keep track of public opinion about the war back home or did you want to?
- Taber: We kind of did. I don't know that it was a big issue. And, again, mainly because we had people coming in and out all the time. We always had somebody coming in that was from New York or Texas or from back here or whatever, and we'd ask them. And they'd tell what you was going on, if there were protests or that kind of thing. And then the media was—again, everything was there, so we were pretty well up-to-date on what was happening.
- Mark: That wasn't then apparently—antiwar protests weren't a big topic of discussion? Not something—
- Taber: No, not really. Again, as I said, I didn't run into any of that going over or coming back. And most of the people in my outfit I don't think did. I heard more of that when I got back from the service. People said they were met at the airport by protesters and—
- Mark: Welcome to—
- Taber: Yeah.
- Mark: I know in talking to your father we described—he described a distillery that someone made. I don't imagine you had to make your own alcohol necessarily.
- Taber: Didn't have to. Beer was plentiful. And in the M club they had hard liquor, too. It was mostly beer. Real easy to get that and have it shipped down. Keeping it cold was a little different. We did have a couple refrigerators, but that obviously wouldn't hold enough.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Taber: Go down easy in the night. All canned beer.
- Mark: 3.2 or regular?
- Taber: Regular stuff. Budweiser and Miller and whoever would send things.
- Mark: Now, the military is sometimes accused of producing alcoholics. Anything you see in your own personal experience to give credence to that?
- Taber: Producing? I don't know. I think—it's so available. I think—it's the same with cigarettes. It was cheap, it was available, and they had it. If a guy wanted to do that, he did. In my particular outfit, we didn't. I think

the real combat arms guys maybe, because it was an escape. And the—the one incident I can cite there is during the Tet Offensive I was bartending at the M club. And the 11th Cav were across the street from us. And one of the—I'd actually made the last call. And one of their guys came up and had had a few too many already and wanted some more beer, and we told him it was last call, he couldn't have any more. And he came across the bar just screaming mad. And his buddies had to pull him back and then apologized. But I think it's just what—because it was available, it was as much as you wanted to—to use it or as much as you didn't want to use.

Mark: Nothing you couldn't find on campus?

Taber: Nothing you couldn't find on campus.

Mark: (Both talking at once.)

Taber: Yep.

Mark: So that you didn't see anything where alcoholics affecting operations?

Taber: Again, in my particular situation, no.

Mark: That's all I can ask you.

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: I think with Vietnam, what people often associate with Vietnam are some drugs that they can, you know, look at the history, it—it varies over time. You were in some middle period. Did you notice the marijuana and this sort of thing?

Taber: When I first got over there, not too much. And then—actually, I went over in August of '67, and then I extended my tour twice, so I didn't actually get out of the service and come back until October of '69, so it was two years over there. But in '69, yeah, it was prev—prevalent.

Mark: What—what do you think accounted for that shift?

Taber: Um—

Mark: From what you could tell, I guess.

Taber: I don't know where the supply was coming from, but it just—it seemed like everybody, all you had to do was ask anybody that would move to get you whatever, and they could come up with it. They—they, you know, were saying it was the communists were supplying all this stuff cheap, so

we'd all get high and then be poor soldiers. But I don't—I really don't know where it came from.

Mark: Um, you know, another sort of morale indicator that sort of changed during this time was race relations, too, especially in rear areas like where you were. Was your—what are your recollections of—of the black and white relationship?

Taber: As a rule, I don't think we had a problem. What—where the problem was, appeared to be, that the blacks still wanted to be segregated, and we were—we were willing to accept them in and—and do everything the same. As a for instance, we happened to have a small building become available to the—the engineers that were running our electrical system, had been in the building and they left. So that was available for us to move into. And we hand picked some people to be in that. It was the VIP hootch, mainly headquarters people. And we had our supply sergeant, who was black, and another guy from headquarters with me that was a stenographer that was black. One guy that was with me at headquarters joined in on everything there. The supply sergeant just stayed by himself, wouldn't come out if we partied, whatever.

One time—a part of my duties was to show the guys around when they came in. And we took a young black gentleman down to the M club, and there were three of us with him. A nice guy, was talking to us, no problem. We talked about home, we talked about where he was going, what we were doing. And floor—floor—four black gentlemen came in and sat at a table directly behind him, and it took all of 30 seconds for him to start looking over his corner—over his shoulder at them. Nobody said a word. And we talked to him, and within a minute, he just left; didn't say thank you, didn't say, "I'm going to go talk to these guys," he just left and he was with them.

And the Puerto Rican guys weren't that way, and the other Spanish background people weren't that way. But the blacks really wanted to stay by themselves.

Mark: Was that something that stayed constant all the time you were there or did that—

Taber: Uh-huh. Yeah.

Mark: So that didn't change necessarily, like you mentioned the drug use went up during the time you were there—

Taber: Uh-huh.

Mark: —and those sorts of relationships—

Taber: Yep.

Mark: —were pretty constant?

Taber: It was—it was the same way all the way through basic. On my floor, I don't remember that we had any minorities. And, again, part of that was because—in basic part of that was because it was the guard and reservists. But my friend Tuller was on the first floor, and there was six or seven blacks in that room, and he just couldn't stand them. He felt that they were totally different than what he was, lack of respect for the building and each other and for us. And I—I really didn't have a problem with that.

But, yeah, it went—it went all the way through. I think the career guys, all the senior enlisted people, I think they got along better with the lower enlisted people and they kind of segregated themselves. Could party together. Didn't like the same kind of music. Ours was more mellow music, kind of like the *Good Morning Vietnam* kind of thing. We—we were stuck with that kind of music, and they were into a little harder things. That wasn't provided for them. When we'd have the USO kind of shows come in, it would be white bands.

Mark: I don't suppose it would be a main venue.

Taber: No, not too much so.

Mark: I'm going to get to the Tet Offensive—

Taber: Okay.

Mark: —in case you're wondering. I just have one more—

Taber: I'm not worried.

Mark: —question. And I'm not sure if it applies with you or not. Did you have much contact with the infantrymen in the field? Did they ever get back to your area?

Taber: No. As I said, we—my particular headquarters for the first year was pretty much in the middle of everything, and nothing got that far. And then the second year, we moved down. We were halfway between Long Binh and the Bien Hoa air base. And we are sitting on a hill all by ourselves. So we really had very little contact with—unless somebody was lost and wanted to know where they were going, they wouldn't stop with us. We were pretty isolated.

Mark: Okay. Tet Offensive. Now, you got to Vietnam when, again?

Taber: Went over in August of '67. That was February, '68.

Mark: Yeah. Did you have any inkling that something was going to happen? I know, the siege at Khe Sanh was going on, for example.

Taber: Um, a double-edged question, yes and no. We weren't sure. The 11th armored cav, which is Patton's outfit, was at Black Horse, which is 10 or 15 miles south of us. We knew they had left. They were going north. Didn't know why, but we knew they were going north. And for some reason, a troop came back. And as—as our compound was set up, it was the village of Xuan Loc, and then there was, oh, a football field size area, then a road, then us, then a road, then the 18th ARVN. And we had a street that ran right through our compound from one side to the other to the 18th ARVNs from this field. And that troop with the 11th cav pulled in there. Don't know why, don't know who sent them, whatever, but they fanned out and parked in there and they—those guys came over that night, which was the incident with the guy who wanted the beer. We closed down between 10:30, 11. I was on guard duty. I had pulled first shift, and we changed over at two hours. And I was sleeping, and it was just all kinds of racket. And the guy I was with yelled, "Oh, my God, the cav's opened up." And I rolled over and looked out the machine gun port, and it was red traces, which were ours, going that way and white traces, which were theirs, going the other way. And that was really the first that we knew.

And physically what happened is the Viet Cong were—or North Vietnamese, I don't remember who it was, came through the village quietly, didn't know the cav was there, and literally walked in and bumped heads with the APCs and tanks. And had they not been there, they would have walked right across the street and gone through our little gate post and gone right through our compound down to the 18th ARVNs. So we spent the night there watching mortars come in and shells going all over the place, and—

Mark: Now, prior to this, I mean one of the characteristics of the Vietnam War is that even when you're in a so-called rear area, and your area might still be attacked at some point. Prior to Tet, you hadn't had a terrorist attack or anything like that—

Taber: Uh.

Mark: —at your post.

Taber: We had had one real mortar attack and one that stuck three mortars in the road that didn't explode that we didn't know had happened till the next morning when somebody went to leave and says, "Hey, there's a mortar round stuck in the road."

Mark: So these happened at night?

Taber: Uh-huh. You developed—we developed a sense that you would hear them pop when they'd launch it. You knew that there was incoming at that point.

Mark: So back to the Tet. You were awakened by combat essentially, so—

Taber: Yep.

- Mark: —why don't you just sort of walk me through the—the next couple of days. Because this was on for a couple days, I would imagine.
- Taber: Yeah. I was fairly lucky because I was already in the—the guard bunker at that point, which happened to be on the opposite side of where they came in. The firing battery on the north side of town got hit fairly heavily, a lot of casualties. We were fairly safe with the 18th ARVNs being across the street from us. So they were covering over us, but they had 50 calibers, machine guns, and they would shoot over our compound to where the bad guys were. Everybody else, of course, had to get up and get to the bunkers.
- Some people were assigned to pick up additional ammunition or weapons or whatever it might be and get them out to the guard posts. So I didn't have to do that. We were already in place at that point. Up pretty much most of the night, and we had eight people in that bunker. In the morning, everything had pretty much settled down, weren't under attack anymore. There was sporadic kind of gunfire, and we—other than staying in the bunkers, it was kind of normal routine. We went to breakfast. If you wanted to shower and shave, you did. And if you didn't have—didn't want to, you didn't have to. I think we were in for four days, and then I had been scheduled for an R&R, so I had to go sit out in the open field against a tree waiting for a helicopter to come in and pick me up so I could go down to Tan Son Nhut and fly out to Bangkok.
- Mark: Um, so it was just a couple of days then—
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: —and things quieted and—
- Taber: Actually, they had—the people that had attacked Xuan Loc were pushed back to the cathedral and the orphanage really that first night, which again leads me to believe that the 18th ARVNs were pretty good guys.
- Mark: Yeah.
- Taber: And they were in there for a day or two before they were flushed out. But it was pretty well cleared up after that.
- Mark: And you're not sure if it was ARVN—I mean, if it was North Vietnamese or—
- Taber: No, the regular reserve or recon. I would guess that it was regulars, but I don't know.
- Mark: And what happened after, when things calmed down? I mean, this is when the car probably—it blew up politically in—

Taber: Uh-huh.

Mark: —the United States. And the GIs' perspective in country, I don't know, how did—did things change? Did things go back to normal?

Taber: I think most of our people felt we were better off than we were before, because we had survived that, had it beat it back. And, again, that's perception over here whether we won or lost it. And from our standpoint, we won. From the standpoint over here, we got surprised and—and got our butts kicked.

Mark: Were you that surprised, though? I mean, the—the public certainly was in the United States, but I mean for GIs?

Taber: Part of the perceptible problem on Vietnam is that we weren't real struct(??) military. There wasn't the discipline there until we needed it. And we were real loose with stuff we did or didn't do; my dad would have got booted out of the service for, there's just no doubt in my mind. It was the same way at the Tet Offensive when they attacked USAV headquarters down at Long Binh. When they interrogated those people, they said, you know, "We weren't supposed to have any problem with this, because it was all clerical nonsoldier." And that goes back to they didn't realize that we all basically had infantry training in basic and everybody knew weapons and everybody knew how to use that stuff. And—and when need be, that's when we pulled together. So it was, you know, totally different kind of situation. And from an outside standpoint, yeah, we were—we weren't military. It was just way too loose. But everybody pulled together when they had to.

Mark: Uh-huh. So after Tet, was there more concern about security? Did it get more struct(??) after?

Taber: In our area, a little bit. But that didn't last too long. Again, we moved within a year, so we were down to a different place. I don't know, there were I think more patrols in the area, and they watched a little bit better what was going on. We still had the—(Unintelligible.)—headquarters and firing battery on the north side of town got hit one night. Snipers came in and walked right up to the—the barbed wire and then came through a drainage ditch and blew up some of the artillery, took out a lot of people. So it was kind of a come and go. It wasn't something that—which is a fault of the system; it was like cowboys and indians. We circled the wagons, and then they came to us. We never went out.

Mark: Uh-huh.

Taber: So we just sat there. And when they decided to attack, they decided to attack. We had to respond at that particular point. So you'd get lax in what we were supposed to be doing, lose that little edge. Didn't take long to get it back.

Mark: Um, as you sort mentioned, you're essentially bait—

- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: —waiting for them to come. I mean, do the GIs say, "Let's go out and get 'em?" I mean, are—
- Taber: They—
- Mark: How much of that is—
- Taber: Oh, yeah.
- Mark: —looking at the war later and seeing what happened and how much—I mean—
- Taber: In—
- Mark: —to the attitude of the guys there?
- Taber: Being in artillery, it was very frustrating, because there were no fire zones. So you couldn't fire within a hundred yards of a railroad track, and you couldn't fire within a hundred yards of a village or a road or—or whatever.
- Mark: So there would be—would be combat restrictions you hear about?
- Taber: Yeah.
- Mark: In your case, anyway?
- Taber: Definitely.
- Mark: There were a lot of them?
- Taber: Definitely. So you'd get a report, and it wouldn't take, you know, to be in combat long to figure out if you walked down the railroad track, you weren't going to get artilleried, and you weren't going to get aircraft dropping stuff on you, because it was a no fire zone. So that's part of the problem where their supply system worked. But you couldn't fire within that—and if we happened to land one on a railroad track or whatever, all kinds of accountability had to justify why it was fired there and how—how come it missed where it was supposed to go, if it did miss what it was supposed to go to, and just a better—

Mark: Did you have a handle on what the restrictions were all about? I mean, a railroad track, the—the Republic of Vietnam wouldn't want you to hit that, for example.

Taber: Uh-huh.

Mark: I mean, I—what were the re—why were these certain things restricted, to your knowledge—your recollection?

Taber: Well, we always felt that it was political. And I think that's why we have the—the lack of discipline in the military at that point is they weren't letting us do what we were there to do.

Mark: That was the feeling at the time?

Taber: Yeah. Yeah. There was no doubt—I said we were near the 11th cav. There was no doubt in our mind if you put those guys 20 feet apart in their APCs on the south of the country and went north, it would be done. Just no doubt in their mind that you couldn't do this. The rumor is that Bob Hope owned this rubber plantation, and Texaco owned this particular area, and we couldn't disrupt that kind of thing. So you—you stayed away from it.

Mark: Then there was the South Vietnamese government as well—

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: —and their interests—(Unintelligible.) The—the South Vietnamese government, when you talk about the ARVNs and how they were in your comm—in your area and when—uh, fairly respectable soldiers, did you have any opinions about the South Vietnamese—

Taber: Nothing.

Mark: —government?

Taber: No. I don't think we ever discussed what they were doing or who was in charge or anything like that.

Mark: Or didn't much care?

Taber: Didn't much care. That—excuse me—that is a fault that I see in American philosophy is that we went over and expected them to speak English and them to provide us with whatever. And very few people on our end were willing to learn Vietnamese or adjust to their customs and their life style, and, you know, it was foreign. And people didn't care to get involved in that. And in some of the other places I had gone on leaves—

(Unintelligible.)—we expected them to be our way, and we weren't going to be their way at all. Big differences.

Mark: Now, you had a one-year tour, but yet I think you mentioned you extended, you stayed over there longer than one year.

Taber: Uh-huh. Yep.

Mark: How long did you stay? I mean—well, did you have to? Did you volunteer to stay over—

Taber: You volunteered.

Mark: —or were you volunteered, as they say?

Taber: You could volunteer for six months extension.

Mark: Oh, so you—

Taber: But you didn't have to—there was no limit on the number of extensions. My feeling was, as I said, I was a stenographer, and I think I used my shorthand twice in the time I was over there. I had wanted to go to the Philippines, because my dad had been there, on an R&R, and the commanding officer's driver had wanted to go to Bangkok and didn't want to go by himself, so I went with him to Bangkok. If you extended, you got a noncountable 30-day leave to come home, you are got another R&R. And you knew where you were going. As I said before, I didn't particularly relish the idea of going to Germany, particularly when I'd been promoted and they expected me to be better as stenographer than what I was. And I wasn't doing it. So—and, again, it was back to the this is where things were happening, this is where I wanted to be.

Mark: Yeah.

Taber: So at 10 months, I extended for six and came home for a month, went back for the eight months and extended again another six months.

Mark: So you spent two years total?

Taber: My records will say 26 months, but it was 24.

Mark: How unusual was that?

Taber: Um.

- Mark: Or was it?
- Taber: Kind of rare. A lot of single extensions, not many double extensions. Some of the career guys, again, incentives is dollars, combat pay, overseas pay, nontaxable. And there was a motor pool sergeant that had been there three years continuous. He just kept extending. And I don't know if he had problems he didn't want to face back here, but I think the money was good for him. And I think he had some things going on the side that he didn't want to give up, and—
- Mark: And he wasn't in the infantry.
- Taber: And he wasn't getting shot at routinely, so—yeah, wasn't in the infantry.
- Mark: Um, so you didn't come home then till about '69?
- Taber: Uh-huh, October, '69. I actually came home—
- Mark: Oh, your leaves.
- Taber: —in the spring—
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Taber: —on leave, and then I came back and—
- Mark: Anything remarkable about that trip?
- Taber: Um, no, not that I can think of.
- Mark: Did you wear a uniform by chance?
- Taber: Yep. When we came back—I'm not going to keep them straight—came to Fort Dix first, or did I come back to—no, Fort Dix was last. I went back to Oakland. And everybody was given completely new dress uniforms and basically turned in what you wore back, which normally was fatigues. And they gave you a complete dress uniform with all your ribbons and patches and all of that.
- Mark: They had them all prepared for you?
- Taber: Well, they weren't prepared for you. You got measured and fitted and put on and told where the flight was, and they'd ship you back home and when you had to be back. So we rarely brought anything back clothes wise, because you knew you were going to get a new uniform. In fact, I lost I

think my second one because one of the guys didn't want to put up with that when he went home, so I gave him what I wore back, and he took—came back on the leave and then he lost it, so I didn't get that back. But—um, fairly—fairly routine we didn't have any trouble at the airports. Got yelled at by a young lieutenant who was going over because we walked with a friend from one terminal to another and didn't put our caps on when we left the building. He was going to get us all court marshaled and kicked out of the service when he got over there—said he was going to. That didn't work.

Mark: A little hard telling you guys what to do?

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: What they would have called in World War II chicken. I don't know if they did then, being overly GI?

Taber: Yeah, something like that. A little insubordination there.

Mark: I was wondering if you ever—(Unintelligible.) **[End of Tape One, Side Two]**

Taber: No.

Mark: So you went back for a couple times without any more incidents like the one in Dubuque that you mentioned?

Taber: No. Not a bit. Not at all.

Mark: You came back then in '69 here in Wisconsin—or did you have—did you have some sort of a tail end here in Wisconsin?

Taber: No. I went in in January of '67, actually I got sworn in in October of '66 on the delayed entry, so technically I got the whole three years in. And because I was—my last tour was up in October, they weren't going to assign me for November or December to someplace. So I got early out that way.

Mark: So you're done—

Taber: Pretty much.

Mark: —with the military?

Taber: Yep.

- Mark: What did you want to do now? What did you want to do to get your life back on track?
- Taber: I had already made up my mind that I wanted to get into teaching and went back to Platteville, went into secondary education with a geography major and political science minor, and used the GI Bill to go to school.
- Mark: How did that work?
- Taber: It was okay.
- Mark: Did it cover your expenses?
- Taber: I was living at home. I was living at home.
- Mark: Which, I suppose, helps.
- Taber: Mooching off the parents, yeah.
- Mark: Across the street was it—were you still across—
- Taber: No, weren't across the street then. We'd—we'd moved, so it was a little farther away, but—
- Mark: So it covered your tuition, it covered your books?
- Taber: Uh-huh. And then I got married in '71, so my GI Bill went up a little bit, because you have a dependent. And then I did—the geography department needed a lab assistant or a teaching assistant.
- Mark: At the university?
- Taber: At the university, so it was kind of a work study program that I was on there. And, yeah, that covered it. My wife was working part-time at that point. We did okay.
- Mark: Uh-huh. In terms of finding gainful employment after you grad—after you left—
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: —college, did you have any trouble? I mean, the economy was starting to sour by this time.

- Taber: Um.
- Mark: The—the—the buoyant '60s economy was sort of turning to the '70s.
- Taber: In teaching, yeah. In order to get a social studies teaching job, you had to coach something, and that really when I went to job interviews, they weren't looking for the teacher as much as they were looking for the coach.
- Mark: I think Mike Holmgren was—(Unintelligible.)
- Taber: Yeah. So—(Laughter Mark.) I went back—actually, I got a job in a eyeglass manufacturing place in Platteville for six months, and then I went back to school, took some grad credits and got a comprehensive social studies, so I picked up a lot of history credits, some of that kind of thing. Tried teaching searching again and did manage to get involved substituting in a strike for three days at a local school, but I didn't get a teaching job.
- Mark: Now, there's—there's such a thing as veteran departments for government jobs.
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: I don't know if that applies to public schools or not. Was that—
- Taber: I didn't even question it. I—I had assumed that I had good enough grades and a good enough background and being older, having gone in the service three years and then come back to school, that I should be a viable entity for somebody to hire. And the only real offer I had was for—no, I guess I had two—Catholic school in West Bend and one down in Union Grove. And they were close, but at that time I had children involved, and I felt I needed a little bit more income than what they were willing to offer for that area. Had it been out in Grant County, it would have been sufficient. \$6,200 a year was big money. But I was looking for seven, and that just wasn't available.
- Mark: Is that—I want to come up to the time you were—when you got into veterans service. I want to go back a little bit and talk about some of the other—the adjustment issues. Your father came back with—(Unintelligible.)—fever. You were in a tropical region. Did you—did you have any—any adjustment problems, physical, psychological?
- Taber: Physically, no. The only thing in basic training, I fell and banged up my ankle, but that doesn't—didn't amount to anything. You know, I had it wrapped for a couple days, and the boots kept that healed pretty good. So there wasn't anything else.
- Mark: No pension(??)—kind of lingering—

- Taber: No.
- Mark: —debilitating trauma?
- Taber: No compensation or anything like that. Readjustment wise, I think I was lucky in that I took a lot of slides while I was in the service and of my R&Rs and whatever. And what I started doing when I got back and people knew that I had them is I was going around and doing half hour, hour, whatever, showing the slides and talking about being in the service. I was doing that for some elementary schools, did that for eight consecutive high school classes in a row. I almost couldn't talk at the end of the day. And I think that got me through that, kind of my—I vented it all that way and didn't—and definitely the family was always supportive, and you know, just didn't—it wasn't anything going on at campus at that time. Vets club was very strong and probably the most popular organization on campus, and we were in everything that they did.
- Mark: So you oftentimes hear in veterans service, I'm sure you've probably seen, the veterans so-called in the closet, the Vietnam veteran in the closet. That wasn't your case at all.
- Taber: Uh-uh. Don't think so.
- Mark: I mean, you're a veteran who spoke publicly about your war experiences. No particular reaction one way or the other?
- Taber: No.
- Mark: People interested or politely listening or—
- Taber: I think most people interested, because being in that administrative end of it was a different perspective from one you're seeing on the news, people getting shot at and the damaged bodies and that kind of thing. It was totally different from what we were seeing with, you know, the construction. We were doing roads, we were clearing jungles, we were doing bridges, electricity, water purification plants and all of that stuff that was actually helping South Vietnamese economy. You didn't see that—
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Taber: —on there. The med caps, which I mentioned I think in the form here, we would go every three months, our doctor and our medics, we'd just pick a village and we'd go out. They'd check all the kids. We'd treat whatever happened to come along there and did a lot of positive PR things that never got back to this side. It was never shown on the news.
- Mark: Before we get to the veterans service, I'll ask you quickly about veterans organizations, the Legion, the VFW.

- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: Right after the war when you first came back, did you—did you join or not?
- Taber: Not interested.
- Mark: For what reason?
- Taber: Except some guy that I knew was the adjutant at the American Legion post.
- Mark: Someone I know?
- Taber: Someone you've met. And said, "Hey, how would you like to join the Legion? And it's 20 bucks." I had 15 bucks on me, and he goes 15. And I said, "Yeah, here you go." And he immediately said, "Okay, that covers last year. Now we need 15 for next year." And that was it.
- Mark: That was—
- Taber: That was the first of all this.
- Mark: We're talking about your father. (Laughter by Taber.) Sometimes on tape we can't see what's going on.
- Taber: Yes, yes. That was one thing. VFW, the university veterans club tended to hang out at that bar, and I think—
- Mark: Were they VFW members?
- Taber: A lot of them were, and I think that goes back to what my dad said on his tape was the Viet—the VFW people were the combat vets.
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Taber: Legion was anybody who had been in service, whether they were combat or not. So it's a different personality group in there. And I think the VFW actually did a little stronger effort in getting the Vietnam vets in there.
- Mark: See, I was going to ask is one of the complaints you sometimes hear among the Vietnam vets is that they didn't feel like they fit in to the Legion and the VFW.

Taber: Uh-huh.

Mark: You know—

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: —older guys who had been in so-called real war and weren't necessarily, um, respectful I guess might be the term. Is that—your experience was not that?

Taber: There was some of that, but I think part of that is that particularly because the Korean guys got lost. The World War II guys were the ones running the legions and the VFW. And they had been doing that for 30 years, and they were getting tired of it. And it was always the same guys, which is what happens now. It's the same bunch of guys that runs the post, that does the parades, that does whatever. And they were looking for the replacements, and a lot of the Vietnam vets coming back went, "You didn't like us being over there in the first place, why should we come back and help you?" And I think that's what it was. With the VFW it was, "Sign up, and we'll make you an officer." You hadn't ever attended a meeting. And you go, "Well, no, I want to hang out for a year and see what you guys do."

Mark: They wanted some young blood?

Taber: They wanted young blood in there. And rightly so. But it was—again, we came back individually. World War II guys came back as a unit. They went as a unit; they came back as a unit. Same with the civil war guys. It was all the same. Everybody from Platteville went as a Platteville unit. Everybody from Madison went for the Madison unit. And we were—there was one other guy from Neenah that was in my outfit. He was the only one from Wisconsin. So it was totally different to come back.

Mark: And you could come back at different times?

Taber: And come back at different times, yeah. So I really wasn't—and the other—in my particular case, I do not drink. I don't smoke. And smoking in those places at that time would just kill me. It would just clog up my sinuses, and I couldn't stand that kind of thing, so I didn't join any of them. I was a member of the vets club on campus.

Mark: Which you seem to speak highly of.

Taber: Yeah. That was a bunch of crazy guys.

Mark: (Unintelligible.)

Taber: Yeah.

Mark: Well, I suppose we're up to the veterans service period now. How did you—

Taber: Okay.

Mark: —find this job?

Taber: We'll segue into that, because the—I actually was in the Legion for a year or two, and then I dropped my membership. And when I got into the veterans service office, my predecessor had been county service officer for the Legion for years and went to the elections one night at the county level and said, "I don't want it anymore, I've got this nice young guy in the office." Fortunately I got wind that he was going to do that, and I stopped at the post and paid my dues. But the people from Platteville told him point blank that I could not be service officer because I wasn't a member. I caught it. But anyway, so I'm active in the Legion.

Couldn't find a teaching job and worked in the factory, went back to school, decided I had to find something else to do. And I'd gone to job service office. And through social services, they had an environmental health officer position. And the counselor that I talked to said, "I really am not sure about this. There's another guy that handles the program. You go talk to him." And so I said, yeah, I'd do that. So we changed offices, and they set me up an appointment with the director of social services to go down for that. And offhand—excuse me—offhand the counselor says, "When you're done there, go across the street to the courthouse and see Nolan Gibson at the veterans service office. He's got a job." Thought, "Okay, wouldn't have anything to lose." I went down to social services, interviewed for the job. They said, "You got it, but"—for whatever reasons—"we need to interview a couple more people. But you can be assured right now you've got the job."

Mark: Now, is this for the service office or is this—

Taber: No, this was the environmental health officer for social services. That's when weatherization and all that was getting big in '74. So I went across the street and saw Mr. Gibson. And what it turned out to be was a job with Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs in Wis Vet Outreach. And the gentleman who was in that position was doing it part-time, was going to school. And he'd graduated and moved on to other things. And Mr. Gibson was a personal friend of John Moses, who was secretary here at the time; and he said, "If you've got somebody in my county, I want to pick them." So they actually had held the position open for about three months.

And he got on the phone. He called up here, said he had somebody he wanted him to interview. They said, "Bring him up." So I came up on a Wednesday I think that—I think it was Monday I was at job service. Wednesday I came up here, interviewed with Bob Kolkra(?). Bob says, "Yep, you're it. We can't hire you till the following Monday, but there's a meeting in your area, representatives on Friday, be in Eau Claire." And so actually I started that following Friday and went up to Eau Claire and got indoctrinated and then started out with three counties, Grant, Iowa and Lafayette. And I don't know if you know the history of the program. They started out with—

- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Taber: —40-some counselors. And when I came on, there were 36 of us.
- Mark: The idea was that it was to find Vietnam vets who were in town who were in the closet—
- Taber: Yeah.
- Mark: —that weren't coming in asking for their benefits.
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: So reach them with benefits and just—(Unintelligible.)
- Taber: Yeah. We went out and literally pounded on doors.
- Mark: How—how did you find these guys? Did you have lists of these names?
- Taber: WDVA was getting discharges, and they were providing us with a list, and it was standard procedure for us that when you talk to somebody, it was, "Do you know anybody else in the area here who is a Vietnam era vet?" And we'd build our list that way. And normally, at least what we were doing in our area, was we were—we were traveling to. The eastern part of the state was pretty much staying in Milwaukee and Stevens Point in offices.
- Mark: Uh-huh.
- Taber: And on the western half of the state, we were going out and would call, try and set up appointments, go see five, six, eight guys a day, depending on how far we had to travel.
- Mark: What did you find among Vietnam vets?
- Taber: Nice bunch of guys, didn't know anything about state benefits. Most of them I think were aware of federal programs. Again, most of them weren't in veterans organizations. A lot of them had plans to go to school but weren't necessarily doing that; came back, worked the family farm or had a job someplace that they could go to and just kind of assimilated and were out on their own.
- Mark: So they weren't necessarily mad at the government and turned off by the government, didn't want to deal with that; they simply weren't aware?

- Taber: Weren't aware of any of these places, yeah.
- Mark: You think you drummed up a lot of business for the VA?
- Taber: I think we did. If you would ask Mr. Gibson particularly in Grant County, yeah, when I started, we jumped up over a million dollars in net benefits coming into the county. And mainly because I said, "Okay, go." And Nolan was nice enough that he would give me the department forms. And, you know, somebody expressed an interest in economic assistance loan or part-time study grant or whatever, Gibson would give them to me whether they were in Lafayette County or Richland or wherever, and I'd take them and we'd fill them out and then I'd bring them back to him. And he would actually submit them. Some of the other service officers were a little more protective of their territories and that, "You will not do anything in this county. They come to me. You refer them to me, and I'll do it." So we kind of sidestepped that a little bit by doing things in Grant County.
- Mark: Now, just as a sort of aside, there was a lot of people that would later become active in veterans affairs who started out with—with—
(Unintelligible.)
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: You later became service officer, which is a lot better—(Unintelligible.)
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: (Unintelligible.)—I mean—
- Taber: Rich Hudtke(??), Bob Berg(??). I think those are the only ones around anymore.
- Mark: So I would imagine that seems sort of logical and probably obvious, your experience with Wis Vet then sort of lined you up for the service officer position.
- Taber: Uh-huh.
- Mark: Just explain that sort of transition.
- Taber: Actually, when we got going in Grant County, there was the service officer and a secretary. And we had about 5,000 veterans in the county. At one time, there had been an assistant. And, actually, after my first year, Wis Vet was cutting six people every year.
- Mark: It was supposed to be a limited duration.

Taber: Yeah. It was—we were all LTE. And because of the cuts in funding, they were losing six people a year. And so I—as I said, I started out with the three counties, I picked up to five, I picked up to seven, and it was almost to the point where I was going to have everything from LaCrosse to Dane—

Mark: (Unintelligible.)

Taber: —Dane County. Yeah. And Mr. Gibson had been in the office for quite a while and was thinking retirement.

Mark: World War II vet?

Taber: Yeah. Had told me that he maybe would like to have me in as an assistant to train as his replacement. And we'd actually gone to the—the county board chairman, and they said, "No, you don't do enough to"—you know, veterans guys, forget it. "We don't need to have an assistant in there. You've got a secretary." And towards the end of my fourth year with outreach, I didn't want to do Dane County. I just—I didn't want to have 10 counties and—

Mark: Oh, they were going to add Dane County?

Taber: They were going to add to it, yeah.

Mark: It's a biggie, too.

Taber: They had Green, Dane, everything from here west and from the border up to LaCrosse is what it was going to be, because they were going to be down to just six people to cover the whole state. And Nolan's secretary was going to have her first child, and the feeling was she was not going come back. And so I wandered in one day and said, "Hey, you still looking for an assistant?" He went, "Well, I don't know." I said, "I think I'm going to lose my job here shortly. I would like to continue doing this, if we can do it," and went up to the board chairman again. And he looked at me, and he says, "Why are you doing this?" "Well, I like doing what I'm doing. I'd just as soon stay in one county and do it here."

He says, "No." He says, "There's not enough money. We could only pay you as a secretary." And I said, "GI Bill OJT." I could get half again as much money under OJT on the GI Bill as I was going to get paid by the county, so started at 6,000 I think was the annual salary, and I was picking up another four, 5,000 under GI Bill. Then I got a raise. I started in July of '78 and got a raise in January. And then the following year, Nolan put in for a big raise, it was over 3,000, and they for whatever reason, gave it to me. So technically I started as the secretary, went to deputy, went to assistant, and then he retired. And the chairman at that time dropped us from the grant, dropped the service officer salary and would not replace anybody except Nolan in the office, because her husband worked down at the university and she knew that all of our business was with university students and if you were veteran students, so we obviously couldn't justify

our existence. So I got a whopping quarter an hour raise when I became service officer, and we dropped off the CVSO grant till four years ago.

Mark: So you became the service officer in 1980, something like that?

Taber: '85.

Mark: '85.

Taber: Uh-huh.

Mark: Well, I just want to discuss the period briefly. Now, with the Wis Vet, you were doing just Vietnam vets. Now you had all the vets of all different areas.

Taber: Uh-huh.

Mark: Were they different or were they all pretty much the same?

Taber: Pretty much the same. Other than that the older vets, the World War II vets, at that point didn't feel they were owed anything. They did their time, they came back, they got on with their lives. A good percentage of Vietnam vets felt that the country in general owed them for the time that they put in, whether it was combat service or not. It was just I think that kind of attitude that we did this under duress, you drafted, you sent us over there, and nobody liked us there, and nobody likes us here. You're going to pay for it. Which in turn led to the VVA and whatever other Vietnam veterans group which were fractured off of Vietnam—or VFW and the Legion.

Mark: Uh-huh. What are the biggest challenges? Is it keeping the vets in line, is it explaining that there aren't benefits for certain things or keeping track of the benefits or just in general?

Taber: Right now it's keeping track of all the changes. Normally it's trying to explain to someone why they can't do—why the VA or why WDVA can't do what they want them to do. A lot of things with the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II, all of a sudden people that have legitimate compensation claims when they got out of the service and never did a thing showed up, and they have no track record to show that they had treatment from the day they got out to the day they wanted to apply and trying to explain to them what that means. You know, they obviously remember things very clearly as to what happened and where they were, but everybody that was there that could corroborate it is gone. And the fire in St. Louis with those records being gone, it's really hard to tell them why this isn't going to work, what you have to do to get it, and they just can't get it, so—

- Mark: Folks who need help can't necessarily get it.
- Taber: Yeah. Uh-huh. And it's starting to get to some of those people now feel that—that they're owed. It's not unusual for somebody that came in, "Well, I know Joe Veteran down the street. He's been getting money and free health care and medications and everything from the VA, and I can't get anything. Why not? Because we were in the same place, we did the same kind of things." But they don't see the differences in the—little tweaks in there that made them different than somebody else. It's hard to explain.
- Mark: Yeah. Well, there must be some satisfying parts of your job, too. What do you like about it the best?
- Taber: I like when those go through and actually get something that we can work through, it goes real easy and very appreciative people. I've had some problems when I initially got into the office, which may be a World War II attitude, also, Mr. Gibson would not deal at all with people with bad paperwork who felt they deserved it.
- Mark: The Blum(??) discharge—
- Taber: Regardless.
- Mark: —whatever the case may be?
- Taber: Yep. If you had a bad paper, you were bad soldier. You needed to get kicked out; there's nothing I'm going to do for you.
- Mark: So your attitude is a little more generous?
- Taber: Mine was, "Okay, why did—why did this happen? What really do we have," you know, extenuating circumstances that kind of thing. So we got some upgrades that are deserved. Somebody that's literally got no income and you get them on pension or you get them a loan. You have the spouses come in and go, "I got this letter from the VA. What—what the heck does it mean?" And you explain the VA now owes them \$4,000 in an adjustment, and then they break down crying because they've got all this money, and they didn't know how they were going to get it, and they didn't want to go to jail because they knew if they lied the VA would come and get them and cart 'em off. That's I think the best part of it is those—dealing with the older veterans, because you end up going through depression and the depression era and—and other things, and now something's happening to them that they're in need and we're getting it for them.
- Mark: Those are all my questions. Do you have anything else you'd like to add?
- Taber: Nothing I can think of.

Mark: Anything we skipped over?

Taber: No.

Mark: Well, once again, thanks for coming in.

Taber: Okay.

Mark: I appreciate it.
[End of Tape Two, Side One]

[End of Interview]