

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DENNIS WAGNER
Infantry, Army, Vietnam War
2000

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Wagner, Dennis. Oral History Interview, 2000.

Master Copy: 1 video recording (ca. 69 min.); ½ inch, color.

User Copy: 2 audio cassettes (ca. 69 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Abstract:

Dennis Wagner, a Middleton (Wisconsin) veteran, discusses his Vietnam War service as a member of Company C, 2nd Infantry Battalion, 1st Infantry Brigade serving as a platoon leader stationed between Chu Lai and Danang. He touches upon infantry officer training at Fort Gordon (Georgia), airborne infantry training at Fort Benning (Georgia), and jungle training in Panama. Arriving at base in 1969, he talks about sweeping the countryside for insurgents, night ambushes, working with dogs, problems caused by heat, and field rations. He also mentions the skill of helicopter pilots, hospitalization and treatment for an infected leech bite, and fears of malaria. Wagner details the fire fight relieving a company that had been overrun. In this action, he was wounded by small arms fire and received the Silver Star. Wagner states that he does not regret his Vietnam War service and enjoys attending reunions.

Biographical Sketch:

Dennis Wagner was born in Sioux Falls, South Dakota and served as a platoon leader of Company C, 2nd Infantry Battalion, 1st Infantry Brigade during the Vietnam War. Wagner was involved in ROTC at the University of Iowa before enlisting in the military in 1967. After the war, Wagner returned to the University of Iowa where he used the GI Bill to earn a master's degree in Sociology, and then a PhD from the University of Madison. Wager maintains his military contacts and attends reunions.

Interviewed by James McIntosh
Transcribed by Pooja Singh, 2010
Checked and corrected by Channing Welch, 2011
Corrections typed in by Rebecca Quincey, 2011

Interview Transcript:

McIntosh: Talking to Dennis Wagner on the 10th of August, the year 2000. Where were you born, Dennis?

Wagner: Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

McIntosh: And you entered the military in 1967, I see. You were in the ROTC originally?

Wagner: Yeah, I signed up in ROTC, for—

McIntosh: When you were in college?

Wagner: When I was in college, recruitment '66. That's kind of like inactive duty, and then I went active later.

McIntosh: Then you didn't finish your ROTC?

Wagner: Oh, I did.

McIntosh: Oh, you did finish. In South Dakota?

Wagner: Actually the University of Iowa.

McIntosh: Iowa. All right, and so when you entered, you entered as a second lieutenant?

Wagner: I did, indeed.

McIntosh: Yeah, that would be the next move. Where did they send you?

Wagner: To Fort Benning, Georgia for Infantry Officer Basic Course.

McIntosh: OCS [Officer Candidate School]?

Wagner: OC-well, no there's—yeah, there's actually the equivalent in the ROTC.

McIntosh: You must've had some of that already.

Wagner: Right, I had already been to basic training in Fort Riley, Kansas in '67.

McIntosh: So advanced course.

Wagner: Advanced course.

McIntosh: How long did that last?

Wagner: You know, I think it was twelve weeks. Yeah, and I went to jump school after Benning (??). Then I was assigned to Fort Gordon, Georgia to an AI, airborne AIT [Advanced Individual Training] training brigade which was an infantry IT.

McIntosh: How is that different from the regular airborne?

Wagner: Well, it's a training brigade. It was an interesting kind of thing from what I could tell. I didn't know them (??), but these were primarily people who had enlisted in the Army who came through this, and they were done with basic training. They were going to, I think it was through eleven or twelve weeks infantry AIT course, but they were RA, essentially Regular Army recruits, and they had volunteered for airborne training after that, and so they established what they called this airborne AIT training brigade at Fort Gordon. And when they graduated from that, then they went to jump school, at Fort Benning.

McIntosh: At that time jump school qualifications was five jumps, or what?

Wagner: Three, I think.

McIntosh: Three? Every time I interview somebody who was in a different era, the number changes.

Wagner: Yeah. But they didn't do night jumps, I think.

McIntosh: They didn't?

Wagner: It's what they cut out.

McIntosh: Matter of fact, I interviewed a guy who was in the infantry getting ready to go, went to England—before to the D-Day, and they selected him and twenty other guys in that infantry unit, and pronounced them airborne. And they took two jumps in England, and the next thing you know he was flying over France the night of D-Day. With, you know, after all these tales of how many jumps and all the planning in the tower and all that stuff, they didn't give him any of that. They just pushed you out of the plane a couple times. They said, "How difficult could it be?" And that's what they told him [laughs].

Wagner: Yeah, the chute either opens or it doesn't.

McIntosh: Right. So anyway, it's interesting how things can vary under the circumstances.

Wagner: Yeah, they just got pressed (??).

McIntosh: No kiddin'.

Wagner: But the night jumps caused more casualties—well, I mean injuries.

McIntosh: Because of falling into unknown areas? You're not prepared?

Wagner: Well, you know, you don't know what you're coming down—

McIntosh: Rocks or trees.

Wagner: Surface hard and, you know—(??)

McIntosh: Okay. So after this was done, they shipped you off to Vietnam?

Wagner: Right.

McIntosh: And do you recall when you arrived there?

Wagner: Well, it was in the spring of 1969. Actually I went to jungle school in Panama first for a three or four week period, and then we went to Vietnam from San Francisco to Saigon and then up north, and then—so it was April or May, somethin' like that.

McIntosh: Are you acquainted with Tim McCue here in Madison?

Wagner: No.

McIntosh: He did all this. He spent his time in Vietnam in the jungle, in jungle teams.

Wagner: Well, no, I was in—it was a training thing that I went to in Panama. Jungle training school. That was a three week thing, and then I went to Vietnam after that.

McIntosh: And where were you assigned in Vietnam?

Wagner: I was assigned to Charlie Company, 2nd [Battalion] of the 1st Infantry 196th Light Infantry Brigade. It was north of Chu Lai, between Da Nang and Chu Lai.

McIntosh: What was your particular duty at that moment when you arrived? What were they doing?

Wagner: Well, I was an infantry officer so I was assigned as a platoon leader in the

company.

McIntosh: So no airborne activity?

Wagner: No, no, this was—there was no—I mean, the 173rd Airborne were in Vietnam and a brigade of the 82nd and 101st, but there were no—I think there was only one combat company in Vietnam (??). So there was no ability to—and no reason particularly I don't think to jump large battalions of troops and no place to land.

McIntosh: That was my experience when I spoke to the others. That was their view of the thing. So you were on a search and destroy mission?

Wagner: Primarily. Search and clear, search and destroy and I Corps [Tactical Zone, a corps of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam] and various AOs [Areas of Operation].

McIntosh: And what size unit did you operate?

Wagner: Well, our unit, a rifle company, it's a light infantry brigade company that has three platoons of about—between sixteen to thirty in each platoon and, you know, a captain, three platoon leaders, three squadrons.

McIntosh: You operated in that large of a unit, generally?

Wagner: We operated—we did a lot of platoon patrolling, and then we would move as a company unit to a new position so then we would sweep those positions, and then we'd move on as a company. On a couple of occasions, we operated in battalion strength with other companies in combat operations, but the more routine stuff was platoon size and company sized operations.

McIntosh: What heavy weapons did your group carry?

Wagner: Well, the [inaudible] weapons were M60 machine guns, one on each platoon. We had once in awhile would carry a 90 mm recoilless rifle which was the modern Army equivalent of the bazooka, but those things were heavy to carry, and not a particular—I mean they're an anti-armor weapon, and of course we weren't running into any armor, but we used them periodically for—flush out the—

McIntosh: Sure. No tanks? You had no tanks?

Wagner: No tanks attached to us. Our brigade had a company of half-tracks, half-troop.

McIntosh: APCs [armored personnel carriers]?

Wagner: Once in awhile we'd [inaudible] with them. APCs, right. No Sheridans [tanks]. They're too heavy for rice paddy operations. They can't move in that kind of terrain, and that terrain's fairly open, and that has hedgerows (??), and they're big targets.

McIntosh: I know, the APC gets you around, but on the other hand it's quite vulnerable.

Wagner: Very vulnerable. They don't like to get close to [inaudible].

McIntosh: They're easy to hit.

Wagner: And they had that anti-tank weapon. The RPG 7, 8, 9, 10 is a very good anti-tank weapon.

McIntosh: That fired—what kind of a shell?

Wagner: Well, it was very much like the old bazooka. It's an RPG round, essentially a rocket with a [inaudible] grenade on the end.

McIntosh: Did you use phosphorus in those?

Wagner: Them? Or us?

McIntosh: No, I said, did you use phosphorus on those grenades?

Wagner: Us?

McIntosh: Yeah.

Wagner: No, these were their weapons, not ours.

McIntosh: Oh, I misunderstood.

Wagner: The RPG rifle propelled grenade. Rocket propelled grenade.

McIntosh: Right. Did you and your 90 mm, did you fire other rounds than just anti-personnel—

Wagner: We didn't shoot – we had HEP [high explosive plastic] rounds, or HEAT [high explosive anti-tank] rounds they called them, which would be used against bunkers. And we had a flechette [pointed steel projectile] round, which was an antipersonnel round. We didn't use the white phosphorus

rounds. People don't like to carry those things because if they shoot one, it would light up like a Christmas tree.

McIntosh: I saw a lot of those injuries from the white phosphorus in Korea.

Wagner: Mm. Yeah.

McIntosh: Bad stuff, bad stuff.

Wagner: Were there mortars? Mortar rounds?

McIntosh: Yeah, seemed to be.

Wagner: We didn't have mortars. We didn't carry them around. Too big.

McIntosh: You carried a 60mm mortar with you?

Wagner: No, we'd like to have had one, but we didn't. That was not standard equipment in Army units in Vietnam. The Marines had them.

McIntosh: Ah, there's where I got the mortar things. But they always seem to have—

Wagner: They have platoons—60s of 'em.

McIntosh: Yeah, not the bigger one, just the small one.

Wagner: Right.

McIntosh: So what kind of success did you have? Was it moderately successful these missions, they generally accomplish what they wanted? Or was it kind of frustrating? 'Cause they fled faster than you could get to them, or no?

Wagner: Well, it was primarily an ambush war, and it's difficult to measure success in these counterinsurgency operations. I mean, we swept the areas, we hunted for weapons, we set ambushes at night, we tried to control the countryside to essentially kind of draw a demarcation line between what was controlled by NVA [North Vietnamese Army] primarily at that time and what was controlled by RVN [Republic of Vietnam].

McIntosh: Was infiltration at night a problem?

Wagner: It was in the static positions like battalion base camps which essentially are, you know, barbed wire base camps where they have artillery and maybe a landing strip and stuff like that. In our positions we didn't—I mean, would be probed periodically, and then a few companies were overrun at night.

McIntosh: You didn't put out wire?

Wagner: No, we couldn't carry that stuff.

McIntosh: I suppose that was difficult, and it was hard to move—

Wagner: And carry that stuff. Too heavy. And they'd have to helicopter everything in, so—

McIntosh: Were you resupplied by helicopter?

Wagner: Oh yeah.

McIntosh: Generally?

Wagner: Always.

McIntosh: Always?

Wagner: Yeah, never any other way.

McIntosh: There were no trucks? Or the roads to take 'em?

Wagner: No, there were no roads. Or few.

McIntosh: Highway 1. They had one major road, that—

Wagner: Highway 1. A few others, but by and large we never operated on them.

McIntosh: How did you deal with the potential of mines?

Wagner: Well, primarily just by experience. I mean, the point men were more experienced troops. We didn't typically put people out there that didn't know how to do that. One of the responsibilities was to try and recon that kind of stuff, tripwires and things like that. But there's no effective way to deal with mines, really. You just hope you don't step on them. We did have dog units, but they won't trip a pressure mine because the dog's not heavy enough to step on a pressure mine. So we did hit some mines.

McIntosh: But they're hard to find?

Wagner: If you sweep 'em and they're not plastic mines then, you know, you can sweep 'em, but you can't sweep every yard you're going to walk [inaudible] patrol situation.

McIntosh: Operating like this is fatiguing?

Wagner: To say the least.

McIntosh: I mean the tension level of never knowing when you're going to be very, very busy is—

Wagner: Right.

McIntosh: Extraordinarily tiring.

Wagner: Yeah, I mean it's essentially any turn could be an ambush; any step could be a mine. Of course it's enormously hot, and the terrains were pretty difficult, and of course it's a light infantry unit which means there's quite a heavy pack.

McIntosh: I would think if you had a dog around, they could be trained to smell the Vietnamese.

Wagner: Well, they tried to do that. They had dog units with us, and they often walked point. The dogs could be very easily overcome by the heat, actually more than to some extent than the soldiers because they're closer to the ground. In close terrain, you know, they'd have some trouble breathing. You know, everybody when you get tired of course—

McIntosh: Right. How about smoking? Was that permitted?

Wagner: Smoking cigarettes?

McIntosh: Yeah, how did you keep that under control?

Wagner: People smoked in the daytime, but they didn't at night.

McIntosh: Stopped them from revealing their position.

Wagner: Right. Not at night, for the most part.

McIntosh: No talking also?

Wagner: Pretty quiet at night. Pretty quiet. There might be some talking, but by and large we just had one man up, and every squad had a man up in every platoon's CP [command post] and at least one man up in the company's CP on the perimeter.

McIntosh: That's what others have told me. They had gotten used to not communicating by voice.

Wagner: Well, a lot of times there'd only be one guy up in the squad, and his position would be too far from the other squad to be able to be talking to anybody. On a closer alert basis there might be two people up, you know, usually at the machine gun.

McIntosh: Sure.

Wagner: But if we were just setting up in rice paddies it's hard to do (??) more than three lines—as a company.

McIntosh: And then food? Everybody carried their own?

Wagner: C-Rations. Resupply maybe once every three days and then they'd bring in a hot meal.

McIntosh: Oh, really?

Wagner: Yeah, we had hot meals periodically in the evening—or not in the evening but, you know, 5-6 o'clock. Then they'd after the end of the march (??) bring 'em in, bring the resupply, and they'd—

McIntosh: Generally one platoon was on guard in the evening for the rest of the company or more?

Wagner: No, there would be three platoons, and they'd be circling the wagons so to speak. Every squadron in every platoon would—or at least two depending on the size of the unit. It varied from, you know, it was considerably relative to casualties (??). So we would have, I would say, at least nine men on the—eight guys up on the perimeter.

McIntosh: Twenty yards apart?

Wagner: Yeah, twenty. Depends on the terrain; could be closer. And if we had Starlite Scopes.

McIntosh: Oh, yeah, how'd those work?

Wagner: Well, they project a kind of lunar (??) image and they permit you to see things in kind of a weird, fuzzy way but farther away, and you can catch movement more easily or at a greater distance with them. So we had one of those in every squad.

McIntosh: So what was the drill as you're looking out across the rice paddies and there's some movement over there? What was the first move generally? Alert everybody?

Wagner: Yeah, I think that's the first thing you do is call in on the radio, and they alert the CP and the CP alerts the other platoons. And then the second thing would probably get a squad leader up or an officer up, and then typically we would recon it with maybe a flare.

McIntosh: I mean your interest, of course, is that one or is that twenty-five or something like that.

Wagner: Sure. Yeah.

McIntosh: That's the first decision, isn't it?

Wagner: Yeah, I think that always when you see one you assume there are more. It's not safe not to, you know.

McIntosh: I see. You wouldn't just throw out some grenades—well, you didn't have a grenade—just to infiltrate that area around where a person was seen, see what happens from that?

Wagner: No, I don't think so. I mean we had OPs out there. They would have already, you know, essentially they would have already helped (??) us move. If we had an ambush out we would have to come—we'd have to, you know, contact that ambush. So you wouldn't automatically do that, but you could depending on the location.

McIntosh: And you had some wounds? How did you deal with wounded?

Wagner: Very well, basically.

McIntosh: Do you call in looking for an empty spot to put a helicopter down?

Wagner: Yeah, we called to them. We called medevacs, and they came. They usually came as soon as they could, weather permitting. We got people evacuated in the middle in the night sometimes.

McIntosh: Oh, really? That must have been a real job for those guys in those choppers to find that spot.

Wagner: Yeah, well we had strobes, strobe lights that [inaudible].

McIntosh: They point straight up?

Wagner: Yeah.

McIntosh: So they couldn't see 'em—

Wagner: Put 'em the bottom of your foxhole they would strobe up, but they couldn't been seen, you know, more laterally. Highly focused, laser-like light that they couldn't be seen laterally. So we could call 'em in at night, and they'd come.

McIntosh: But they required a fair amount of clearing, though, to be safe to touch down?

Wagner: Yeah, yeah, it's hard to do that at night. They had—they were very good pilots.

McIntosh: Yeah, they were so many things they did that were unbelievable. It's incredible.

Wagner: Some of the places—I don't know why they—

McIntosh: [laughs] And you didn't think they'd be able to get a chopper down and—

Wagner: Seemed pretty scary to me. But I'm not an aviator (??).

McIntosh: So now tell me about winning the Silver Star. How did this come about?

Wagner: Oh, well, you know, there was a firefight, big ambush. Lot of contact that day. Took a lot of casualties in my platoon and captured a couple machine guns and things like that. It's not exactly, not entirely my effort by any means.

McIntosh: Captured a machine gun—you overran the position?

Wagner: Ah, yeah, pretty much (??). It was a weird little ambush. We tripped it prematurely and got one gun right away and then we got the other later which was in front of me. Then we—it was a long and difficult day.

McIntosh: [laughs] Boy, difficult is probably an understatement of what it really was.

Wagner: Yeah, we lost about half the company in those first few days.

McIntosh: Being overwhelmed, Dennis, is that what you're saying? There were just too many of them to—

Wagner: Well, yeah, I think we—

McIntosh: You couldn't match up with 'em?

Wagner: We got in the middle of a brigade and [inaudible] two companies, and the first company in was overrun, almost overrun at night, and they had, I don't know, thirteen KIAs [Killed In Action], something like that. I don't know how many wounded. We went in to relieve them, and we got in because we took the right route, and then we got essentially in the center of this thing, and we were trapped with them. Then they evacuated them and left us, and then we were hit the next night by, I don't know, probably a company sized unit, something like that. And then the next day we moved out, and they ran into a bunch of ambushes and finally pulled back, and then, I don't know, it was just—an interminable war.

McIntosh: Out of your company, how many came out of that?

Wagner: About 50%. I don't know how many. We had at least—I think we had three. We didn't have a lot of KIAs, but we had an awful lot of wounded.

McIntosh: Did you carry a medic with you?

Wagner: Every platoon had a medic.

McIntosh: By—one per platoon?

Wagner: One per platoon which—a platoon would be fourteen—like I say, fourteen to thirty depending on how things were going. And there was a company medic, too, a senior medic.

McIntosh: But no physicians?

Wagner: No physicians.

McIntosh: A lot of responsibility for those guys.

Wagner: Yeah, yeah. But the medevac system worked so we could get people out pretty quickly, and we could get them back pretty quickly—to a battalion aid station.

McIntosh: Generally—right, if their wounds weren't that severe you would be able to return to your outfit?

Wagner: Yeah, right. They could be back. They could go back with a shrapnel thing, be stitched up, spend a few days at the rear, and never really evacuate all the way to the—

McIntosh: Right. Just be out for a week or two.

Wagner: Yeah, then they'd be back.

McIntosh: Were you wounded?

Wagner: Yes, I was.

McIntosh: With small arms fire?

Wagner: Right.

McIntosh: Enough to be evacuated?

Wagner: Right, all the way to Japan.

McIntosh: Oh, really? Oh, that's a more significant injury.

Wagner: Yeah.

McIntosh: What were you—how were you wounded?

Wagner: I was hit in the leg and a lower extremity as they call it. Broke my—the small bone.

McIntosh: Fibula? In your leg? A little one? The fibula.

Wagner: Right. And it was pretty late in the tour for me, about a month or so, so it was not something I think that you would have come back for. Probably it was too serious to come back from, but it wouldn't have happened anyway because I only had like thirty days left in Vietnam for that anyways.

McIntosh: Practically any fracture of those require more than a couple weeks.

Wagner: Oh, yeah. Oh, I was out one night—

McIntosh: Chances are you wouldn't have come back.

Wagner: I had a cast on for I don't know how long.

McIntosh: Probably at least six weeks.

Wagner: I think so.

McIntosh: Oh, sure. I'm sure of that.

Wagner: I can't remember.

McIntosh: You were Regular Army?

Wagner: No, I was a US Army Reserve ROTC [inaudible].

McIntosh: Right. So you didn't sign up for any particular time?

Wagner: Yeah, well, it was a two year active duty hitch from the time I entered after graduation. And then of course I had service time before that because of basic training and stuff in the ROTC.

McIntosh: But your obligation was two years?

Wagner: My obligation was two years.

McIntosh: All right. Now, this Vietnam Gallantry Cross—I'm not familiar with that.

Wagner: Oh, that's a foreign decoration that, you know—

McIntosh: Given by South Vietnam?

Wagner: Right, a South Vietnamese decoration.

McIntosh: I've just not seen that one before.

Wagner: Well, it's on your DD 214 [discharge certificate] so I might have the name wrong. It's something like that.

McIntosh: [laughs] That's very good, though. That's outstanding. So, but no other injuries you suffered?

Wagner: Well, yeah, I got a little shrapnel in my arm, you know, here and I had kind of a weird—I was bit by a leech, and it got infected, and I spent a little time actually in the evacuation hospital for that, maybe a week or so, but I returned to duty after that. But other than that—actually that was when—

McIntosh: Lucky you didn't get gangrene from that.

Wagner: Yeah, I did have amoebic dysentery, too, once. That happened about the same time. So I had a week—I had a couple weeks out during about the middle of my tour for those kinds of things which—

McIntosh: Well, dysentery is pretty common, though.

Wagner: Yeah, yeah. I drank the water. "Don't drink the water." [laughs]

McIntosh: That's right. If you drank the water—

Wagner: Not out of the rice paddy. But you're getting' kind of thirsty, so—

McIntosh: Right. Water was a problem I'm sure. Keeping fresh water and a lot of supplies.

Wagner: Well, we had the tabs, purification tablets.

McIntosh: Yeah, but then you take the water out of the ditches and put purification tablets in—

Wagner: They tried not to take it out of the ditches, but, you know, a lot of times that's what were was, and if you couldn't get resupplied water, which certainly didn't come everyday—

McIntosh: When they resupplied you with water, what was that in?

Wagner: A big rubber drum.

McIntosh: Thirty gallons? Thirty gallon or more?

Wagner: Oh, I think it was bigger than that.

McIntosh: Fifty?

Wagner: Yeah, I think so.

McIntosh: Probably no more than fifty, though.

Wagner: Yeah, it was a big rubber, heavy rubber, vulcanized—they just rolled it out of the helicopter, and it bounced on the thing, and it had a spigot in it and filled it up. And it was purified so you didn't have to use the tablets.

McIntosh: Right.

Wagner: So it was the taste—

McIntosh: So that would last you—would that be for a platoon?

Wagner: That would be for the whole company.

McIntosh: The whole company?

Wagner: Right, the company resupply.

McIntosh: So that'd (??) probably be about every three days or then.

Wagner: Yeah, and sometimes more often if we were closer to—and the weather was right and they had the resupply ships, stuff like that.

McIntosh: Have to tell me about the bugs. How did you deal with those?

Wagner: Oddly enough, you know, you don't—I was concerned about other things, and I didn't—

McIntosh: [laughs] I understand.

Wagner: I never really felt very put upon by them. Only a couple times that I remember being irritated by that at night in a couple locations. So I—

McIntosh: Did they give you DDT or any spray?

Wagner: Yeah, we used DDT and people rolled their sleeves down at night and that kind of thing, but we didn't—not many people complained about the bugs.

McIntosh: Malaria wasn't as prevalent, I don't think, then.

Wagner: We had a lot—at least several people get malaria.

McIntosh: Depends on the area, though.

Wagner: Yeah, well, I wouldn't say a lot, but it was a significant number of people who got malaria. And a couple of my friends I know got it after they returned. And they took the pills—you know, we took the pills every day.

McIntosh: Well, pills don't prevent it. They just keep your symptoms under control.

Wagner: No, that's right. No, I meant—chlorophyll tablets, those white tablets. We took those every day, and then we took a big, brown pill—

McIntosh: Oh, that's new.

Wagner: Every week. I think we took it every week, and the medics handed those out. Every day they went down the line—made you take it, and watched—

McIntosh: Right [laughs]. They didn't trust the average GI to remember to swallow.

Wagner: Yeah. Well, you know—

McIntosh: Sure, I know how it goes [Dennis laughs] Right, exactly, right.

Wagner: They were doing as they were instructed.

McIntosh: Right. Oh, R&R? Did you have any of that?

Wagner: I had one.

McIntosh: Was that a scheduled event?

Wagner: Yeah.

McIntosh: Or it just happened now and then?

Wagner: Well, yeah, they were scheduled, but they came up—we had some eligibility system which I didn't really understand at that time, but I understood better later that you had to be there so long, and then they had to have the slots. And so, you know, there was this distribution system, and then you had some choices as to where you could go. Yeah, I got one—

McIntosh: What was wrong with the Philippines?

Wagner: You could go to the Philippines, was one choice. Singapore, Hong Kong. A few people could go to Australia, not too many. Hawaii.

McIntosh: Oh, Hawaii, that's—

Wagner: Hawaii was a choice, yeah.

McIntosh: So where did you go?

Wagner: I went to Hawaii.

McIntosh: Oh, my (??).

Wagner: Three days, I think. Not very long.

McIntosh: No. Well, that's quite a ways away, though. I'm surprised.

Wagner: Yeah, but that's the farthest; that was the biggest jaunt.

McIntosh: So there wasn't much to do there. I 'spose sit around and go to the bar and—

Wagner: Yeah, I actually had a girlfriend at that time who I met there. She lived in Los Angeles and I met her in Hawaii. So, you know—

McIntosh: Well that was wonderful then.

Wagner: Just like a piece of the world (??).

McIntosh: How'd they ever get you off of that Island of Hawaii once you've got a taste of that?

Wagner: I don't know. Well you had to go back [laughs].

McIntosh: I know it.

Wagner: Wasn't easy.

McIntosh: No. That was worse than your leaving the first time [laughs].

Wagner: Yeah, in some ways it was. But, you know, you just do it.

McIntosh: Yeah, of course. Like all of us, we all did what we had to do. **[End of Tape 1, Side A]**

Wagner: Yeah. I didn't think about not leaving. I wished I didn't have to.

McIntosh: Tell me about the use of marijuana that people talk about. What's your experience with that in Vietnam?

Wagner: Well, my experience is different than most people because I was in an infantry unit, a frontline infantry unit, and we had a couple people I know who used marijuana, and there's—when you're in a unit like I was in, there's two circumstances. One is which where you're in the field, and you're set up in a night perimeter every night, and you're patrolling every day. And there's—in the unit I was in at least, there was a clear understanding that people weren't supposed to do that. And that was not very difficult to enforce, and I never spent any of my time enforcing it because it was easy for the people themselves to enforce it.

McIntosh: Yeah, because it posed a danger for the rest.

Wagner: If you're up and you're smoking marijuana and you're starting to see things out there at night you're or not seeing things—

McIntosh: That's the last thing you need, right.

Wagner: The whole unit is [inaudible] and I think that you wouldn't be able to do that many times and survive.

McIntosh: No, the integrity of the unit is too threatened by that.

Wagner: Right. In the rear, where we would come in, I don't know, on probably seventy-two day cycle—well, might have been more frequent than that, where we would be still patrolling during the day, but we'd be in bunkers, behind barbed wire in fortified positions at night or we're on reaction platoon duty. Then people would be relatively safe, and in the day they wouldn't be fully occupied with all these tasks, and so then I think there'd be a few people who would smoke marijuana. I didn't view that particularly as a problem, you know. You check the guard at night in those places a lot more rigorously than you do in the field.

McIntosh: Heavier drugs?

Wagner: Not in my unit.

McIntosh: No, you wouldn't [inaudible].

Wagner: No.

McIntosh: Do you think generally it was overblown by the media?

Wagner: I think generally it happened in the rear where people had a lot more time on their hands. They did not have to—they weren't, for their own self protection, have to engage in any kind of active fighting or be alert enough to be able to respond when that kind of stuff happened. It wasn't in their consciousness, and it was boring, you know, and hot, and they had a lot of time off. And we didn't have any time off, really.

McIntosh: Generally, you felt that the quality of the soldier you dealt with was good?

Wagner: Yeah, I did. I think I was lucky. I think I was in a very good platoon. I think I was in a very good outfit. I don't think that all the outfits were like that. It's a very informal system, but it seemed to work. There's a natural leadership which I think emerges in these Vietnamese or these Army platoons in this particular war that I think at least in my experience served pretty well. There was no particular Regular Army presence in many of these units. When I came to the company I was in I was the only officer that was a platoon—the other two platoon leaders, one was an E-5 and the other was a Spec. 4, and neither one of them were Regular Army people.

McIntosh: They weren't?

Wagner: They just came up through the ranks in the internal unit system. They were acting platoon leaders, but they didn't have—they were not made officers.

McIntosh: No battlefield commissions for them?

Wagner: No. They didn't do that. [inaudible] experience. At least I didn't experience—

McIntosh: Did you deal with any of the “trade school boys” from West Point?

Wagner: In the battalion level we had a couple of them. One was a battalion commander at the end, and we had one of the S3 which was the operation's officer who was a West Point officer.

McIntosh: Seemed like reasonable fellows.

Wagner: They were a little more aggressive than some, I'd say.

McIntosh: Well, they're on a career—

Wagner: They were career officers. I think there's some positives to that and I think that in some cases, there were some downsides for us. But I wouldn't characterize any of them on any single dimension. We also—the battalion commander I had originally was not an R—he was not a regular officer. I mean, he was a Regular Army officer but he was an ROTC guy. He'd actually been a platoon leader in the First World War. He was probably a company commander in the Korean War, and he was a lieutenant commander in—he had battalion infantry [inaudible] commander in Vietnam. I thought he was a reasonable guy. I thought he had the experience—

McIntosh: Oh, he sure had a lot of experience.

Wagner: And I could tell—you know, I could tell the difference.

McIntosh: So, how would you judge your experience in Vietnam? Worse than expected or about what you expected?

Wagner: I don't know. You know, you forget everything you expected when it's over because it can never be like that. And I can't remember what I expected. I can only kind of remember what it was. I think it's difficult to say that those kind of things can be positive experiences. I think I learned a lot from it, and I don't regret it in some ways. I mean, I regret a lot of things that happened. I don't regret having done it, I guess. Had the circumstances been different, had I been more seriously wounded, I don't know what I'd feel.

McIntosh: It's hard to say.

Wagner: Right. You can't know.

McIntosh: Okay. And how did you handle the animosity that a lot of guys complained about when you got back home from civilians? Was that a problem for you?

Wagner: Well, I was medevacked for one thing. It wasn't a problem for me. I didn't experience any particular—you know, I've read those dramatic scenes at the airport where people were spat upon. I hear that so often that sometimes whether it's—

McIntosh: A lot of it's a myth, I think.

Wagner: I think it is. I'm sure that did happen in isolated cases, and those kinds of rumors spread pretty fast among veteran ranks.

McIntosh: Right.

Wagner: I know a lot of people that I was in Vietnam with, and I'm still in contact with them. In fact I'm having a reunion next week with my platoon in Minneapolis, and I—

McIntosh: Just the platoon?

Wagner: Pretty much CT1. Mostly the platoon and a couple of the other platoons.

McIntosh: Oh, that's nice.

Wagner: So yeah, we do this every two years. I've not heard those stories from them. And I came back in the medevac so I didn't walk out in uniform. I was flat on my back.

McIntosh: So you didn't attract any catcalls then.

Wagner: Right, not at all. And you know, the civilian life is different, and obviously there was a lot of—people were not particularly supporting of the war, and they weren't particularly interested in what you did, and I wasn't particularly interested in telling them either for that matter. So, I don't really, you know—

McIntosh: In that context, those of us who were in Korea went through the same thing.

Wagner: I'm sure. It must have been very similar.

McIntosh: You know, I mean they didn't what you were doing, or had you been gone? You know, they hadn't seen you around for awhile. They just totally ignored you, sort of indifferent to whatever you had to say.

Wagner: They were interested in their own—the people my age and that would've been, I don't know, 23-24. They were in college. They were in graduate school. They had a political view of the war; they had no substantive view of it, and it was impossible—and I never really tried to communicate that to them, and I don't think it'd have been possible.

McIntosh: That's the way it is yet today. Most people have very little knowledge of [inaudible].

Wagner: "What'd you do at the office today?" is not really a question you can ask.

McIntosh: I always remember when I came back after I spent a year in Korea on a hospital ship, and I went to San Francisco. I went up to the hotel where I stayed. From feeling very heroic—came up to the desk in my uniform, signing in, and the desk clerk says, "Oh, are you here for the convention?" [laughs] You know, he's talking to a hero, and he's thinking I'm here for some goddamn convention. Well, that's the way it's gonna be, and it was, yeah [laughs].

Wagner: I think that it was probably more reasonable—I don't know what people expected. I guess their expectations were different. After the Second World War I can see where Korean veterans probably had good reason to expect that it would a different kind of circumstance. But it was fresher in folks' memory, and I think that folks felt that way, for many people in Vietnam, that served in Vietnam felt that way as well. I guess for some reason, I didn't. You know, I didn't really expect the thanks of a grateful nation. I did what I did because I wanted to. I mean, well, not because I wanted to, but I saw that it was a duty to do it, and it was impossible for me intellectually to escape it.

McIntosh: That's only (??)—that's what all of us felt. This is the situation, and so you just do it. Did you have any trouble readjusting to civilian life?

Wagner: Well, you know, I've thought about that since, and I think I did. I think it would have been hard not to. I didn't realize it at the time. It's a very difficult transition to make when you're in an environment that's so different from any civilian environment that you would ever inhabit, and you have been for a long period of time. You know, I was a platoon leader, I was an XO [executive officer], I was a company commander in a rifle platoon the whole time I was in Vietnam. And that's not a normal life, and you become so focused in those duties, and in that setting, that it's all of a sudden, you know, you end up, and you're on the other side.

You've forgotten how—I mean, it's all new, it's all different, and it's hard to adjust.

McIntosh: Right. You're not in command anymore.

Wagner: Right. Not because of protesters or antiwar feeling but only because of the experience itself I think. So, I had a little trouble figuring out what to do and how to get things done in a civilian setting. And I mean I think there is something that's depressing about where you've been in these combat situations for a long period of time that I didn't really recognize at the time. So I think, you know, I didn't just spring back into civilian life and move forward. I went back to school and—

McIntosh: Oh, you went back to finish college?

Wagner: No, I had finished. I went back and got a master's degree after about, you know, six months.

McIntosh: Where?

Wagner: At the University of Iowa. And, you know, I got a job when I got back in civilian life—

McIntosh: So what was your field?

Wagner: Sociology.

McIntosh: So your first job was?

Wagner: I worked—after I graduated I worked for a Model Cities Program in Des Moines. It was kind of like a, oh, the old economic opportunity development thing. And then I came here to the Ph.D. program and got a Ph.D., and then I worked for the state. Now I work for a consultant.

McIntosh: On your own?

Wagner: No, it's a non-profit kind of organization that does research in criminal justice (??). So I mean, you know, I had no—I can't say that I was set back by my military experience by any means. I don't think adjustment is easy for a lot of people. I don't doubt that folks had trouble. And many still do, many people who I know.

McIntosh: My experience from doing a couple hundred of these interviews made me realize that the degree education that a soldier had plays a great role in how they adjusted afterwards. The high school educated only seemed to have more problems than those who had a little broader viewpoint of life

in general. I mean had some college experience. They seemed to handle it very well, and they seemed to be able to figure it out. In other words, position themselves in the new society that they'd come back to rather quickly whereas those who lacked any significant amount of education, a lot of those really could never find themselves and wouldn't see where they fit in. And it was really more of a problem.

Wagner: Yeah, that's interesting.

McIntosh: I interviewed a Medal of Honor winner from Vietnam, Ken Stumpf in Tomah [Wisconsin]. He hadn't even finished high school, and he still has headaches. He still has nightmares, and he's very bitter about everything, and, you know, didn't get what he wanted, doesn't deserve this and—on the other hand, another Medal of Honor winner from Peoria, Illinois, was a captain. He had a unit very similar to yours, and he can describe his experience winning his Medal of Honor and the details of all that in great detail, and he had adjusted for that and has taken that as a learning experience that he thought it was extraordinary that he survived. Whereas Ken Stumpf, when I asked him how did you happen to pull out these guys out of his tank, he said, "I don't know. Somebody said those guys are going to burn to death, and I just rushed over and pulled them out." I said, "Well, did you know—" "I don't know what the hell I was doing." I mean, he just—it was a momentary experience that he couldn't really describe, and he had intellectualized the whole thing. It was just beyond him. "I just did it," whatever it was. Interesting.

Wagner: Yeah, I don't know. I think that certainly you sleep walk in combat to some degree. I mean you do things that you can sometimes see as an image later, but I do think that people just do things. I would think that both stories are possible.

McIntosh: Sure. I understand.

Wagner: What the circumstances look like in retrospect, you know, I don't know. It's—

McIntosh: I 'spose the different personalities—everybody has such a different personality that there's no way that you can generalize someone's reaction to a sudden, desperate situation.

Wagner: Right.

McIntosh: It happens so quickly, and suddenly almost beyond the ability to make a decision. You just have to react one way or another.

Wagner: And everybody does, and some people react at first, you know, aggressively, and some people don't react, and other people sometimes will actually only be fearful and actually be a dead weight sometimes in those situations, and—

McIntosh: You found when it got sticky that a lot of guys were paralyzed, would be paralyzed? In fear of not doing anything or doing—

Wagner: Well, I think there's three types of responses. I think there are active leaders in those situations, people who would be able to immediately overcome their fear and start thinking about how we're gonna get out of this situation. There'll be people who will be able to take action if sometimes else tells 'em—I mean if one of those people, the first type of person, tells 'em what to do [Approx. 10 sec. pause in recording] and, you know, what—

McIntosh: Now, what as a platoon leader—so what as a platoon leader—do you turn around and one of these guys is just frozen here. It's time to move, and they're not doin' anything. How do you get 'em out of that?

Wagner: You give 'em somethin' to do, essentially.

McIntosh: You just sort of shake them up some way.

Wagner: Yeah, you slap 'em or you get somebody else, and you try to get 'em movin', at least shootin' (?).

McIntosh: You mean just yell at 'em or something like that? Does that usually—

Wagner: Yeah. There's some folks that will just almost be [inaudible], you know, have almost like a reaction as heat prostration.

McIntosh: Oh, really?

Wagner: You know, I think, and of course it is a—when you get desperately fearful obviously those things—and almost the first people who were shot got [inaudible].

McIntosh: Oh, really?

Wagner: But maybe they're not even working, you know. They're almost like a casualty.

McIntosh: Well, they are in some way.

Wagner: Well, in some ways they are—

McIntosh: What would you do? You can't leave 'em.

Wagner: Just drag 'em along.

McIntosh: Just pull 'em along?

Wagner: Just—they'll follow.

McIntosh: They're not catatonic then. They don't just—

Wagner: No, no, I don't think so. I think they're just immobilized to some degree from effective, you know, participating—for effective combat operations.

McIntosh: And as the situation eases they will frequently be back to okay again?

Wagner: Yeah, yeah, that's my experience.

McIntosh: That doesn't necessarily mean it won't happen again.

Wagner: No.

McIntosh: Either or not.

Wagner: It doesn't mean it won't happen again. It probably means it will.

McIntosh: It does?

Wagner: [laughs] Yeah, I think it does.

McIntosh: Well, this gets back to core values. So whatever made 'em do it the first time was certainly not overridden.

Wagner: Yeah, I think everybody has to—and not everybody can—I understand that.

McIntosh: A lot of studies have been done about how long an average man can stand being in these constant life threatening situations. There is a limit.

Wagner: Yeah. You know, I think so. Of course you know it's so different because it's not every day. And it's not—

McIntosh: And it's sporadic, too, isn't it?

Wagner: It's quite sporadic, but the threat of it in Vietnam, of course, was constant, that you didn't know what day it was gonna be.

McIntosh: Generally you could look out—in the jungle you'd look, what, thirty feet? That'd be that max?

Wagner: Yeah, maybe not that, and—

McIntosh: Yeah, so that really made it very harrowing.

Wagner: And high and low. But regardless of that you didn't what day the combat would be, you know, and it could be any day, any hour, any moment. It's not like you're staging to go on to the attack. You're always essentially in—I mean the pressure is always on to some degree. But when the moment comes, I think, then people the first time that they have to react to this—I'm speaking from my own experience you have to overcome fear. I mean you can't—

McIntosh: You especially 'cause you're responsible for all those other people.

Wagner: I think that anybody's—the legitimate of anybody who's shot at for the first time is to [thumping sound] stop and to turn, you know, to some degree.

McIntosh: Sure.

Wagner: For most people, and you've got to be able to overcome that, and I think if you can do that the first time or the second time or something like that you can be active in the situation because there's nothin' that's gonna get you out of that except, you know, be offensive essentially. And you've got to be able to face the fire yourself.

McIntosh: Once you're under attack you have to be aggressive to repel this.

Wagner: Absolutely.

McIntosh: You can't receive—just receiving doesn't make you (??) a threat.

Wagner: Absolutely not. When you've got to be able to return fire and shoot and communicate and do the stuff that they train you to do and that's your only hope, really.

McIntosh: Okay. Hunkering down is no good.

Wagner: Doesn't solve the problem.

McIntosh: Got it. Generally those attacks, those ambushes, come to you at night or not?

Wagner: Night, day—

McIntosh: Didn't seem to make any difference?

Wagner: No. It would depend on the tactical situation, how close they could get, you know, where they were at and how many. Some of these—a lot of the attacks were just harassing, sniper fire—

McIntosh: Oh.

Wagner: Others were larger units that attacked us, and, you know, would [inaudible].

McIntosh: Were many in trees? Snipers in trees?

Wagner: There were occasionally, yeah.

McIntosh: They must have been difficult to find.

Wagner: Actually the bigger problem was spider holes [camouflaged foxholes], but because they were very low to ground, and they're—

McIntosh: A spider hole is a one man hole?

Wagner: Right, essentially one man foxhole that's probably, you know, no bigger than a fifty-five gallon—probably not even as big as a fifty-five barrel, and—

McIntosh: Did they have a cover on 'em of some kind?

Wagner: If there's cover over it, you know, and they're shooting from very close to the ground essentially at you and you can't see where they're at on a tree line, then essentially it's pretty hard to effectively return fire, and it's not—it's hard to go in and get 'em.

McIntosh: Especially if you're not exactly sure where they're coming from.

Wagner: Right, you're know they're in. You know there's [inaudible]. You don't know many there are, and you don't know exactly how to outflank it. So—

McIntosh: So how do you deal with this?

Wagner: Well [laughs]—

McIntosh: You need that—now we need that dog.

Wagner: Well, we called artillery.

McIntosh: Oh, I see, “Take out this area.”

Wagner: Yeah, or we would try to flank it, roll it up, but pretty hard to do.

McIntosh: Is that one of the major problems in fighting the enemy? Those kind of ambushes, I mean, those kind of individual ambushes, the spider holes?

Wagner: Well, they—that was their technique. Essentially they didn’t want to—they wanted to neutralize the impact of the artillery and the air power that we could call. Primarily, you know, the way they did that was to begin an action with an American unit in the target zone and then in a relatively concealed position. So they could draw you into kind of elaborate ambushes, and they’d be close enough to you that you couldn’t effectively use the [inaudible], you know, jets or even artillery. So it was their preferred technique for inflicting casualties on us was to draw us into those kinds of [inaudible] and they could be—could knock around from one to another if there was a battalion out there.

McIntosh: Would they frequently leave that—do some damage and then frequently leave that position?

Wagner: Yeah, they could—

McIntosh: And disappear?

Wagner: They could evacuate them, but they’d have—they’d already have an evacuation route that would not be open, you see what I mean. They could pull people out of those holes, and they could come back through the jungle and, you know, exfiltrate is the military term, without fear of overhead observation from helicopters.

McIntosh: Did they move in the jungle better than you?

Wagner: Oh, I’m sure.

McIntosh: Because of experience or—they knew the path or—

Wagner: Ah, experience, I think in part. I think essentially their whole operations were pitched toward a kind of—a lot of them were pitched toward the kind of stuff I’m talking about here which emphasized cover and concealment. And so they always chose to operate in the jungle (??). A lot of times we made a difference choice where we would try to control open areas, and if

we were gonna use helicopter resupply we'd have to go to an open area to have a resupply zone. And, you know, I just think—maybe (??) the order would down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, you know, these were NVA—so that's gotta be a pretty good jungle school (??) just to get 'em down there.

McIntosh: Did you find that there's a difference in the quality of the soldiers? The Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese—

Wagner: Oh, yeah. Quite a lot.

McIntosh: In what regard?

Wagner: Well, the VC that we faced in I Corps [Northernmost tactical zone in South Vietnam] in this period which was '69, late '68, '69 were not really an organized military force anymore. They were—probably served as local intelligence cadres. They might be involved in a little, you know, harassing ambush actions with relatively small groups of folks (??), maybe ten, fifteen at the most. When we ran up against an NVA unit they would be a much larger unit, much more disciplined force, and much better equipped. So they were a higher quality, more dangerous opponent. You never knew how—

McIntosh: They were good soldiers?

Wagner: Oh, yeah. Very disciplined, not very innovative, but were disciplined in a kind of set piece ambush warfare that they'd been doing (??), and for good reason.

McIntosh: Was your unit involved with diggin' into any of the holes of the trail?

Wagner: Yeah, well, there's always—

McIntosh: Well, that was another problem.

Wagner: We didn't get involved in any big—well, we ran into some fairly big base camp bunker units that had been evacuated, one of them after a B-52 strike—

McIntosh: Opened it up?

Wagner: Which hit it, you know, I mean—but we hit it. But—and they were elaborate storied rear support areas. Any action, any large action against the NVA where they were in force, let's say battalion size or regiment size, they would have an elaborate bunker complex that we would then bring in engineers and blow up after they evacuated it. They were not like the ones that they talk about around Chu Lai where they spent years

digging underground and things like that. These were, you know, relatively short term sort of—

McIntosh: I was always amazed at these guys, these “tunnel rats” who used to go down these tunnels, you know, to chase the enemy in there. I think that’s a very difficult—

Wagner: Oh, yeah.

McIntosh: And very dangerous. I’m surprised that they could do that.

Wagner: Highly specialized—and we didn’t have those people because we didn’t face that. We really didn’t very often, you know, engage in that kind of—we didn’t come across that very often and never I don’t think to the degree that they did farther south.

McIntosh: How about villages? Vietnam villages that you came across—was that a problem for you? Because of the infiltration and—

Wagner: Well, we searched villages in what they called the free-fire zone. You know, they were essentially government protected villages, and then there were free-fire villages—they were thought, thought to be VC villages. So we operated through—a lot of times we would operate through villages. We would often search them sometimes. A couple early—you know, we even actually burned a few of ’em. But we had not too much success with finding anything in any of those places, and often—and didn’t generally linger around. Most of our operations weren’t in that populated (??)—

McIntosh: Well, generally the villages were forewarned if you were there.

Wagner: Oh, they knew we were coming, and there was no—they could see us coming up for a long ways away, and there was no reason from them to offer any kind of resistance, and there was not much reason for us to expect to find anything by the time we got there, and most of those searches were just kind of pro forma deals.

McIntosh: Yeah, that My Lai incident was unfortunate.

Wagner: Yeah, I don’t think I ever saw that many people in a village (??) that they—

McIntosh: Yeah. It sounded like it was an unnecessary operation of some kind, but it’s hard to tell.

Wagner: Sounds like a mess to me. I don't know how you can lose control of troops to that degree. I'm not particularly—sympathetic about what happened with [End of Tape 1, Side B]

McIntosh: Hysteria seemed to reign, and I just didn't understand why. It's hard to say when you're not there.

Wagner: Yeah, I don't think that a good officer should be letting that happen. That shouldn't have happened. That order should never have been tolerated.

McIntosh: Probably should have exercised control of that situation.

Wagner: Shouldn't [inaudible].

McIntosh: Those [inaudible].

Wagner: Yeah, right.

McIntosh: And you feel that rightly so?

Wagner: I do, absolutely.

McIntosh: That was my reaction and others I've talked to who were there.

Wagner: There's no pressure—the pressure of warfare being what it is, that's clearly beyond the pale. And it's not an acceptable—you can't let men do that, and you certainly shouldn't encourage them to do it. I feel badly about that.

McIntosh: Yeah, well, trouble is with those kinds of situations is that they get blown up to a degree where it just—it overwhelms any good things that are happening.

Wagner: Yeah, the worst part about it I think is that by extension then—a bunch of people have asked me when they find out that I'm a veteran whether that happened all the time. And I always think, geez [laughs], it's insulting.

McIntosh: Right. Well, that just displays their ignorance, I think. There's no—

Wagner: Right. It's hardly worth bothering.

McIntosh: Well, the public, particularly the uneducated public, is difficult to deal without any basis of understanding.

Wagner: Yeah, but if people want to understand in odd ways as if, you know, all lapse of all the entire veneer of civilized behavior ceases in combat—

believe me, a lot of it does. But, it's not to happen to that degree. But this Korean War incident recently is very kind of interesting to me. Of course it turns out, and I don't know of course what happened in Korea.

McIntosh: No one really knows anything yet

Wagner: But it's interesting that the person [laughs] who—who witnessed all these things turned out not to have been there [both laugh].

McIntosh: Would that be eyewitness? Right.

Wagner: Yeah. I think he was in the motor pool. Had forged a DSC [Distinguished Service Cross] and a battlefield commission—or worse, you know [laughs].

McIntosh: Yeah. This is why the thing suddenly died as quickly as it sprang up when they got a little information.

Wagner: Yeah. And I shouldn't, you know, well [laughs]—

McIntosh: I know what it's like (??). So, you keep track of anybody in your platoon? Still around?

Wagner: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I'll be—

McIntosh: You said you're goin' to a reunion.

Wagner: Yeah, we'll see quite a few of 'em next week in Minneapolis.

McIntosh: Most of 'em survived?

Wagner: Yeah, a lot of people were wounded. I don't know what our—it's hard to recall what, you know, the KIAs [killed in action] would be in an infantry unit for a year, the year that I was there. You know, I mean they weren't low. But the people that return to go to this reunion are primarily folks who were there in '68 and '69. There are folks who got to know one another and kept in touch, which I think is unusual.

McIntosh: It is. This is the smallest unit that I know about.

Wagner: It's a company reunion.

McIntosh: Right.

Wagner: Yeah, and they've done it for a long time. They did have a Brigade—196th Light Infantry Brigade reunion in St. Louis in '89 which was organized

by, you know, at higher level. A lot of people came to that. But we've had these more local kind of events—

McIntosh: Well, that's pretty good.

Wagner: Every two years since about '70 (??).

McIntosh: Well, I've seen a lot of guys go to divisional things, but this is a smaller unit reunion. I think that's very nice. Did you join any veteran's organizations?

Wagner: Actually, I have not. I don't belong to the American Legion or—

McIntosh: Never felt the urge?

Wagner: I have, you know, when you live in Madison, you know, it's sort of—if I lived in a different community, and there was—I don't even know where there is a VFW post where I live. I contribute to the DAV [Disabled American Veterans] and—

McIntosh: Oh, yeah. They only send things out every month. That's all.

Wagner: Yeah, right [laughs]. I do that. I think I actually probably have a membership for that or my wife does, but I can't say that I actively participated in any of the veterans operations. I've never been—

McIntosh: And the government didn't pay for any education after Vietnam for you?

Wagner: Oh, yeah.

McIntosh: They did.

Wagner: Yeah, I received GI benefits. I got my PhD primarily with—

McIntosh: With the Bill?

Wagner: Thousand (??) bucks.

McIntosh: Wonderful. Greatest piece of social legislation in the 20th century.

Wagner: It was definitely a benefit. And I get disability benefits from the VA too.

McIntosh: Oh?

Wagner: Only 10%.

McIntosh: Ten percent on your arm?

Wagner: The leg.

McIntosh: The leg?

Wagner: Yeah.

McIntosh: Oh, I thought that healed?

Wagner: It did, but I don't know, they called me in and wanted to give me the—so they gave me a physical. This was after I'd been out for a year or so.

McIntosh: But you have no shortening of the leg or anything?

Wagner: No. Nothing, I mean, you know, they—and now I have all this other operation stuff that they did on me. I don't know. They just decided to give me some disability.

McIntosh: Sounds like the leech bite deserves more disability than—

Wagner: Yeah, actually it caused me a lot more problems later to have it redone when I got out because it leaked or something.

McIntosh: You had an abscess there.

Wagner: Yeah.

McIntosh: Drained again.

Wagner: Right.

McIntosh: Oh, my.

Wagner: And so it was kind of like outpatient surgery the first time and then the second time it was—I went in, and they sliced me up pretty good. That was a long time ago. So I don't know. I mean, I'm not in any way physically disabled from that experience, but I have a few holes in—

McIntosh: Right. You haven't taken up any jumping out of airplanes for recreation?

Wagner: No, no. I've not ever done that since, and I have not any intentions—

McIntosh: No desire?

Wagner: It's not sport jumping [both laugh]. It's quite a different thing kind of—

McIntosh: I understand.

Wagner: Wearing all that gear and coming down—

McIntosh: I've tried—every airborne guy I've talked to I always ask whether—most of 'em respond like you do, "Why would I want to do that?", you know.

Wagner: Yeah. Well, I think that it's not—I don't know—it's not a sport, you know. It's [laughs] a short drop where you're trying to arrive in a formation, and you've got a lot of heavy gear on—

McIntosh: Especially whether you can make it down without getting killed.

Wagner: Yeah, it's dangerous when you get there, and it's dangerous getting there, and, you know—

McIntosh: Maybe that's why it's akin to buying a Cadillac. It's wonderful to talk about at cocktail parties, and, you know demonstrate something. It's an ego booster.

Wagner: Right.

McIntosh: But like you say, it's no sport. I mean, just jumping out is not—

Wagner: For a lot of people, they paid you more to be in airborne.

McIntosh: I'm sorry?

Wagner: They pay hazardous duty pay, the Army, for the folks who are airborne—

McIntosh: Oh, wow, I mean—but I'm talking about recreational.

Wagner: Oh, yeah.

McIntosh: Yeah.

Wagner: Yeah, well, maybe it is fun because you jump from a high altitude and you don't have 100 pounds of stuff on you.

McIntosh: No, and you've got a chute that you can maneuver.

Wagner: Yeah, and you can do the chute—

McIntosh: But like you said, it's not really a sport; it's just falling off and—

Wagner: Yeah. Well, the military—as I said, the military version is not a sport.

McIntosh: No. I don't think the other is, either.

Wagner: No [laughs].

McIntosh: I mean, you train for that. It's not like you're learning how to play tennis and you practice your stroke and all that stuff.

Wagner: Yeah, it's an exhilarating moment.

McIntosh: Right, it's a rush. Right, I'm sure.

Wagner: You tempt fate.

McIntosh: Right. Nothing you'd get used to, though, do you think?

Wagner: [laughs] No, I don't want to tempt fate. Not anymore.

McIntosh: No.

Wagner: I already have.

McIntosh: Right. So you got away with it a couple of times already.

Wagner: More than once.

McIntosh: Yeah. So, anything you forgot to tell me? Wild and crazy that you want to talk about?

Wagner: No, I—crazy things, you know, happened but I don't know that I'd I want to put that on tape even if I could.

McIntosh: Why's that?

Wagner: Oh, I don't know. It's just, you know, weird things happened in Vietnam, and sometimes when I think about it, it's kind of an existential experience. I think the positive things about it that I would want to put on record were that, at least for me, in my experience was that I learned a lot about people. I learned a lot about how to judge folks and how to work with them. Everybody's got their strengths, and people have their weaknesses. I felt more connected to the country at large I think because of my military experience than I think most people do because I was in an intimate situation and a very dangerous, interdependent one with a lot of my fellow countrymen that I would have never, ever met otherwise. For instance, I came from a pretty white area of America, a rural area. And I served with

and under black officers and with black NCOs [noncommissioned officers], I came to respect folks who were different than I was and actually even see them as role models to a large degree, which would have never, ever happened to me in terms of judging who yourself are and those weird aspects of human nature which can affect all of us. I think that military experience is an opportunity, at least mine was, to see both the best and the worst that people can be and do. And that's a sobering kind of realization. Sometimes I think that it's probably a helpful one to have and you can see that in yourself as well as others. So—I don't know. It was okay. I don't want to do it again.

McIntosh: Okay. All right. Thank you. I appreciate you coming.

[End of Interview]