

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
DAVID L. WEISS  
Radio Traffic Analyst, Army, Vietnam War.

2004

OH  
533

OH  
533

**Weiss, David L.**, (1942-). Oral History Interview, 2004.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 85 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 85 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

David L. Weiss, an Omro, Wisconsin native, discusses his service as a radio traffic analyst in the Army during the Vietnam War. He talks about being unable to enlist in the National Guard during the Berlin Crisis and instead enlisting in the Army Security Agency. Weiss comments on being able to sleep anywhere during basic training at Fort Leonard Wood (Missouri) and training as a traffic analyst at Fort Devens (Massachusetts). He describes his work analyzing radio code traffic patterns and states he was a “glorified clerk-typist.” Assigned to Vietnam, he talks about being sent over as an “advisor” rather than a soldier, his psychological reaction to the assignment, the airplane trip via Guam, Wake Island, and the Philippines, and the buildup activity he witnessed. In 1963, Weiss recalls seeing planes take off to bomb the Ho Chi Minh trail in Cambodia. Stationed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Radio Research Unit for his first three months, he describes seeing Saigon, living conditions on the base, and a typical duty day. Weiss mentions receiving copy of radio traffic from the French in Laos until they left the country. He discusses witnessing political disarray, being issued an old, unreliable weapon, accidentally firing a pistol outside the American Embassy, and wearing khaki uniforms. He speaks of James T. Davis, the first Army Security Agency soldier killed during the war. Transferred to Da Nang, Weiss details his airplane’s taking a detour to deliver an engine to a Special Forces base in the highlands and helping to push the engine onto the runway under fire. He portrays meeting the journalist Richard Tregaskis. Weiss describes the base facilities in Da Nang, his duty there, and tactics the enemy later developed to throw off direction-finding. He recalls his surprise at seeing local Christmas decorations, his awareness of the Buddhist protests, regularly interacting with Vietnamese civilians at a bar, and the wild drinking habits of the men in his unit. Weiss explains the bartering between military branches in Da Nang for food and weapons, and he characterizes a respected, seventeen-year-old second lieutenant. Reassigned to Phu Bai in February of 1963, Weiss talks about security concerns, getting nervous about his safety as his time in country grew short, and reporting an attack that turned out to be someone’s accidentally wandering into friendly night maneuvers. He touches on working with Marines of the Naval Security Group, seeing newcomers go through a phase of psychological reaction dubbed “the crazies,” and having a cigar with General David M. Shoup. Weiss analyzes his impressions of the Vietnam War and the capabilities of the United States military. He touches on his homecoming and getting discharged the day before his unit was reactivated to go back to Vietnam.

**Biographical Sketch:**

Weiss (b.1942) grew up on a farm near Ormo, Wisconsin and entered the Army in 1961. He served in Vietnam from July of 1962 to June of 1963.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2004

Transcribed by Telise Johnsen, 2010

Checked and corrected by WVM staff, 2012

Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2012

**Transcribed Interview:**

[Transcriber's note: Quite a bit of interviewer feedback works were removed to make the narrator's remarks more clear and flow easily.]

Jim: [Chatter and then a pause before interview begins.] May 18, 2004. My name is Jim Kurtz. I'm the interviewer, interviewing David L. Weiss. Ah, Dave, where and when were you born?

Dave: I was born May 15, 1942, in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. My folks lived on this farm at this time.

Jim: Okay, so we're here in Winnebago County right now.

Dave: Right. Yeah.

Jim: And you grew, did you—

Dave: And I grew up on this farm. I went to school in the Omro School System. I graduated in 1960 from Omro High School.

Jim: Okay, and then what did you do after graduation from high school?

Dave: I started college at what was called Wisconsin State College-Oshkosh [laughs] in 1960 and later became Wisconsin State University and then University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh. I went for a year, and like most kids getting away from home and not having a real definite goal for my college education, I took too much of the pool playing and that sort of stuff and didn't have as good a grades as I should have had and was put on probation. And I thought, "I need to get away," and wanted to enlist in the Wisconsin National Guard to get my service obligation underway and out of the way, but when I went down to do it, John Kennedy was president and the Berlin Crisis started, and they froze the Wisconsin Guard from taking any more new enlistees because the Wisconsin Guard was activated during the Berlin Wall Crisis, I guess that was it.

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: 1961.

Jim: Now, you said you had a military obligation. Was that--at the time you were, you know, in your early, late teens and early twenties--something that males in Wisconsin faced?

Dave: Yeah, because you didn't necessarily get drafted, but your chance of being drafted sometime in those age groups was probably 35 to 45%, somewhere

in there. And it hurt the guys that were getting their life established, guys that were already married, maybe had a couple of kids, and then they'd get drafted. Uh, that's one thing that wouldn't happen today. Nobody gets married that young anymore.

Jim: [Laughs]

Dave: [Laughs] And I thought I was old when I got married at 23. And now [laughs] nobody even thinks about getting married at 23, but a lot of people got married at 18 years old, right out--uh, 18, 19, 20--a lot of my friends got married, are still married after all these years, that I went to high school with.

Jim: So, the right thing for you to do was then enlist. What did you enlist in?

Dave: I enlisted in the United States Army, and I was promised to be able to go to the Army Security Agency.

Jim: And what is the Army Security Agency?

Dave: The Army Security Agency is military electronic intelligence, basically. It is directly responsible to the Defense Department and the National Security Agency.

Jim: What did you know about the Army Security Agency that led you to believe you wanted to get into it?

Dave: Nothing. [both laugh] It wasn't carrying a rifle. That's all I knew. [laughs]

Jim: Oh, okay. That certainly is good. Uh, so, when did you go in the Army?

Dave: Uh, October. I believe it was October 15<sup>th</sup>, 1961.

Jim: 1961. And where'd you take basic training?

Dave: Uh, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Beautiful place to visit; hell if you have to [laughs] live there.

Jim: [Laughs]

Dave: Basic training.

Jim: Uh, did you have any interesting, unique experiences in basic training?

Dave: Yeah I got the reputation of being able to sleep anyplace, because you know, you're always tired and stuff, and when we were in our bivouac

week in the first ten days or so of December--funny thing about Missouri, it can get colder in Missouri than it does in Wisconsin at times—and we were on a bivouac week, and a storm moved through and, and it rained and turned to absolute ice. Everything was probably covered with about a half inch of ice and they were lecturing us for grenade training. And, of course, we were sitting on top of our steel pots. Now that's not a comfortable position, but I fell sound asleep. [both laugh] And, of course, the guys launched a grenade off just to-- [laughs]

Jim: [Laughs] You slipped off the steel pot, then?

Dave: I don't remember that, but I just remember the fact that I was able to fall asleep. The sun was in our eyes, you know, and warm. We froze all night, and that's why you didn't get any sleep [unintelligible].

Jim: Yeah. So after basic training what was your next training?

Dave: I went to Fort Devens, Massachusetts. That was where all the training for ASA took place. Fort Devens, I believe, is now closed. There's no longer a military fort, but it was kind of a neat place to be stationed. The little town outside of Devens was called Ayer, Massachusetts, but you were only--there was good public transportation and you could get into Boston within an hour and be down on the Green and stuff like that. I remember visiting the Old Ironsides when I was in, stationed out there, and stuff like that.

Jim: Uh huh. How long was this training?

Dave: Uh, I finished Basic Training, came home for leave over Christmas, and started in January of 1962 and completed in June.

Jim: Okay, and what did they train you to do?

Dave: I was trained to be a—my MOS was 982: traffic analyst, uh—

Jim: What is that?

Dave: At that time period, communication still took place with Morse code.

Jim: Uh huh.

Dave: Radio code. And the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese used very extensively and had a lot of homemade radios. An ammo box or radio was a powerful radio and, of course, they would string the antennas up in the trees. And our job, we had a group of guys that sat and listened for these radio stations when they'd come up, and then they'd copy whatever they

heard. Now most of what we intercepted was in code, on a daily code-sheet-type thing, so it was not breakable and certainly not breakable at our level of expertise out in the field, but we would record and analyze traffic patterns. And you can tell a lot if a link is to a sender and a receiver. If that link has a daily traffic volume of three or four messages at each scheduled time that they come on the air, and then all of a sudden this starts to build to more and more, you know something is going to be going on. Something is happening there that they have to send more information. And so the traffic patterns were kept track of. And basically, I mean, my job was a glorified clerk-typist. That's about what it amounted to.

- Jim: So, you were specifically trained to go to Vietnam. Is that accurate?
- Dave: No. No, it's not true.
- Jim: Okay.
- Dave: Uh, I was trained for this MOS. My class at Fort Devens was about, I'm thinking twenty guys.
- Jim: Uh huh. Yeah.
- Dave: Seventeen to twenty guys, I don't remember any more. And there was two duty stations that we went to when we left there. Five of us went directly to Vietnam. The other thirteen, fifteen went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and we thought we got the good duty; [both laugh] the idea [laughs] of being asked to step out of an airplane and not—[laughs].
- Jim: Yep. Yeah, that was--
- Dave: And that's what they did down there. They took airborne training down there.
- Jim: Okay. So you completed in June of '62, and then you said your orders were for Vietnam. Did you have leave before you—?
- Dave: Yes, I did.
- Jim: Okay.
- Dave: Came home for leave during the last time. One other thing is--1962 our involvement in Vietnam was not a major involvement, and it was done as—anybody there was supposedly an adviser. Uh, all of us that went over at least at that stage in 1962 were put on an official government passport; a State Department passport. And I remember one of the neat things was the five of us went to get our passport photos, and stuff, and applications

down in Boston. And one of the guys that I went to Vietnam with, a guy by the name of Joe LeFrance [?], grew up in Marblehead, Massachusetts. I don't know if you're familiar with the Boston area. That's the North Shore, and Marblehead was a great old fishing town and [had] wonderful, wonderful food. And Joe took us to his home, and his dad cooked steak and lobster for us. And, I remember that was kind of a great—

Jim: So what did you think about going to Vietnam? Because what you're telling me is that at that time we could only have a certain number of people in country as advisers. So you weren't really even going there on the military books, even though you were in the military.

Dave: Yeah.

Jim: So what did you think about that?

Dave: Uh, I didn't go with fear and trembling, as the kids going to Iraq have to go, because that didn't come until later when you were there. And later on, yes, there were Americans that had died. Uh, the man, I can't think of his first name—Davis—that was the first death [that] came from our unit. And he's on the wall in Washington. I looked it up. I didn't know the man. The only thing I remember about it, the early deaths in the war seemed liked; everybody that died was either on an extension or a real short-timer. Nobody [laughs] was new in-country, you know. And, of course, the deaths were so few and far between and your mind plays games on you. But what I remember is the feeling. And I think there was a patriotic fervor to it. I read a book a number of years ago--I don't even know the name of the book, but it was about--it might be Colin Powell's book. His first duty station was in Germany with the Artillery, I believe, as a second lieutenant. And looking acrossst [sic] and knowing that if something happened you're, you're dead. I mean, your chances of surviving an initial attack, if it comes, you know--And, but the thing about it is that I found that year in Vietnam is probably the most real year in my life, even though I was not in a combat-type situation. It was like nothing I've done in my life since has ever been elevated to that level of importance. And this, I think, it was he [Colin Powell] that wrote about that in the late '50s. It's sitting Christmas Eve and watching the monitors and stuff, and I remembered my Christmas Eve in Vietnam, and uh—

Jim: Sure. Well, let's talk about how you got to Vietnam, because I suspect your experience is much different than many of them that, uh, did—

Dave: Yeah.

Jim: Did you go by ship, plane?



Dave: Went by plane.

Jim: Commercial transportation, or--?

Dave: It was contract transportation with the Defense Department. We flew out on July 5, 1962. We flew out of Travis Air Force Base at sunset; landed the next morning in Hawaii. So I don't know how many hours [laughs] we were flying, because we flew—Do you remember the old Super Constellation?

Jim: Yeah, yeah.

Dave: TWA flew them; they were the three tails on them.

Jim: Three tails.

Dave: [unintelligible] plane. That's what I flew to Vietnam. And what was memorable about the trip was that there was another flight, on a DC6 going with military people going to the Far East. Wasn't anything connected with us, but that particular plane had engine problems and it affected our flight because they were supposed to be ahead of us. So we ended up hanging around in Hawaii for an extra couple hours while they put a different engine on that plane. We beat them to Wake Island; we beat them again [laughs] to Guam. And I remember they were heading to Bangkok, and there was a Major on there with his family, and this guy was fit to be tied. He was in tears. He was begging to get his family off this plane. He absolutely did not think the plane [laughs] was--

Jim: Was going to make it.

Dave: --was going to make it [laughs]. And I remember it because the man was doing anything he could to get his people, his family [off] because he had, like, the wife and six or seven kids with him, you know, and so, anyway, he was—

Jim: Did you get to do any sightseeing on these islands that you—

Dave: No. You were basically, "Sit in the terminal. Stay in the terminal." And no, I didn't. Well Wake—

Jim: And you—

Dave: Wake Island, yes. We walked out to the beach. Wake Island, I mean, is, what, a total of six acres?

- Jim: Yeah, it's not very big. Uh, when you got to Guam was there any evidence of B-52s there in '62?
- Dave: We were in Guam at night and I could not see that, but I do remember, at Travis, the B-52s and the B-47s taking off while we were waiting to take off there.
- Jim: The reason I ask about Guam is because when I was there at night, too, going over there, and they were going out to go to Vietnam.
- Dave: Well, see there was no bombing yet at that stage. Now, I saw bombing off the carriers before I left, not in Vietnam. They were going into Cambodia and bombing the Ho Chi Minh Trail; it started February of 1963. Now, nobody—that's never been official, but yeah, I mean, the F-4s were-- wasn't that what they called The Flying Brick, or is it the Phantoms?
- Jim: No, the Flying Brick was the F-105s.
- Dave: Okay.
- Jim: They weren't carrier-based at all.
- Dave: Oh, okay.
- Jim: The Phantoms came off the carriers.
- Dave: Off the carriers. Okay, Phantoms would come over, and this is later on when I would get up to Phu Bai, they'd come over so loaden with armor that they could hardly clear the mountains. I mean they were just--there was stuff hanging all over the place. And they'd come back thirty minutes later, and there wasn't a thing hanging on them. So you know. You didn't hear anything. They went far enough, we didn't hear any explosions, but you know they weren't delivering [laughs] food, I know that.
- Jim: Yeah. [laughs] So did you go directly to Vietnam from Guam, or did you have another—?
- Dave: Ah well, we made a stop in the Philippines.
- Jim: Okay.
- Dave: I mean, this is a prop plane so it jumped every, every place.
- Jim: Yeah, so you had [unintelligible], yeah, yeah.

- Dave: Uh, we got landed at Clark Air Force Base and I remember either Guam or Clark Air Force Base was my first introduction to rice fields, and--
- Jim: Uh huh. Could you describe rice fields for people--
- Dave: All right. I heard this sound. It sounded like the kids were, this major's kids, were chasing something--the little ones. What is that? And I hear it—"Raaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa." And I look and it lands, and there's this beetle. It must be—well, I'm probably exaggerating it, it probably was this big around.
- Jim: Like a golf ball?
- Dave: Yeah. When it walked on the floor it looked like a little toy tur--, a kid's turtle, that's what it looked like when it walked. I mean, it was that size and when it took off, it sounded like a little model airplane. I couldn't believe it, this thing. And, of course, [laughs] I said, "What is that?" And I thought, "Oh my gosh, we're getting to go to the jungle and they're going to; the insects are going to eat us alive!" [laughs]
- Jim: [Laughs] Okay, so from the Philippines, you obviously were pretty close to Vietnam then. So where did you go?
- Dave: Right to Saigon.
- Jim: Saigon. Tan Son Nhut?
- Dave: Tan Son Nhut. And that's where I was stationed from July through October 12th.
- Jim: What was your impression of Saigon at that time of the year, I mean, at that time?
- Dave: Well, it was culture shock for Christian kid from Wisconsin, you know, to go there. I mean, Saigon was a cosmopolitan-type city, also it was also a twin city to Cholon, which was more of a Chinese ancestry-type city. But they were--everything was going on; it was interesting. I remember we bought--somehow we had motorbikes that we bought. I don't know. And I remember riding that and [laughs] in the afternoon after--they always took a si--, they had a siesta in Vietnam in hot weather—And when siesta broke, it was just like, [laughs] you kinda ring the bell and everything just jumps out, and the streets immediately fill up, and these little Renault--
- Jim: Cars--

- Dave: Traffic cars, or taxicabs—There weren't that, it didn't seem like there were that many private vehicles running around, but a lot of cabs, and then the, the cyclos [pedicabs or rickshaws used for public transportation in Vietnam], and everything, and bikes, motorbikes all over the place.
- Jim: What about smell?
- Dave: You know, I don't remember the smell. I know what you're talking about. I think about it, yeah, I remember that there were strange smells, but I didn't find it repulsive.
- Jim: What about the heat?
- Dave: At first it's oppressive, but once you get used to it, it's every day. It isn't, you know--your body acclimates to it.
- Jim: Sure, sure.
- Dave: And I remember that, at that time of the year, October, it seemed like it was every afternoon we'd get a rain shower sometime. And that would kinda cool things out, and yet you'd see the sunset the same day. I mean, you'd have this violent--or not "violent," but this heavy--it wasn't violent like we talk violent with thunder and lightning and a lot of wind. It was just, sometimes it would rain very heavy. I mean, it would hurt almost, it came down so hard. But it was not blowing, you see.
- Jim: Yeah. So, where did you live and work when you were in your first three months in Vietnam?
- Dave: We lived right on Tan Son Nhut Air Base. The airport. The American military had part of it and we lived in--we called them corn cribs. They were--maybe they still had them when you were there—they were barracks built out of mahogany, two-by-four construction, about the size of my corn crib out here. And then they set siding on there like this. Uh, the roof overhung, but from, oh chest height down, it had this siding on an angle. So you had airflow through, but the rain couldn't blow in--is about what it amounted to.
- Jim: Yeah, right. And how many men lived in one of these?
- Dave: I think eight.
- Jim: Eight?
- Dave: But I can't remember for sure.

- Jim: And what kind of food did you have?
- Dave: Just ordinary Army; Army food. We had a mess, good mess hall and that's it.
- Jim: What was your typical duty day in Saigon?
- Dave: In Saigon, I went to work at 10:00 at night and got off at 7:00 or whatever it was--an eight hours, 6:00 in the morning.
- Jim: So, you worked—
- Dave: Slept, I slept in the morning.
- Jim: Okay. And what did you do when you were working?
- Dave: Uh, it was a lot of on-the-job training for me. I was under some other 982s [982 MOS was Communications Intelligence] that were more advanced. And then I wasn't near the intercept sites when I was in Saigon, so I didn't see the guys working and getting the copy. We got copy from the United States Embassy. We got copy from the guys at Saigon that were in somewhere out on the airport copying the intercept. We got copy from the guys up at the station up at Da Nang, and we got copy in the first months from—handwritten copy from the French, it was like a--I want to say xerox, but your carbon [copy] of the French work up in Laos. And that ended—
- Jim: The French were still in Laos?
- Dave: The French were still in Laos. If you can remember that Kennedy helped work out [a] deal where the French left Laos, and so our last copy came in just about the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis.
- Jim: Okay.
- Dave: It was in October. It was when I was in Saigon that it, it stopped.
- Jim: Now, what was on these copies that you're talking about?
- Dave: Basically, you would get a sheet and the guys would copy--it would be copied. And the preamble, "Hello, this is such" [and give] the call letters of the station. The guys, they would identify themselves. This stuff would come in clear [refers to information given in non-encrypted or code format]. "Yes, I hear you" [and] give their radio stuff. And then they would launch into their code stuff, and everything was five-letter blocks. And the text might be as big as this and then they'd go out of that and go

off. And that's all it, you know, and we would write down things like the length of the message. Sometimes stuff would come out in the clear. If anything came out in the clear—

Jim: You would take it.

Dave: --beyond the usual, you know, stuff. We'd always report that because every once in a while somebody would forget and send something out in the clear that had some meaning. Uh, we didn't copy it, but during that period of '62,'63 [somewhere] in there [and] the Hong Kong people were intercepting up in Honk Kong, the North Vietnamese code machine shut down for twelve hours. And they got right "in clear;" everything. And it really helped NSA to go back and with computers break some of the—and find out more information.

Jim: Okay. So what you did is you kind of consolidated what you could in a clerical sense, and then the data went to somewhere else for—

Dave: Then it was shipped on to Washington, right.

Jim: So, did you have any contact with the Vietnamese people when you were there?

Dave: Yes, but it was never in an official capacity. It was always in a--people you'd meet in the stores, the bars, uh, this sort of thing.

Jim: Were you permitted to go downtown, like down to Tu Do Street and—

Dave: Yes. Yes, yes we were. There was no restrictions on us at that time.

Jim: And how were you received by the people there?

Dave: I did not--in Saigon I sensed no--that we were welcomed in Saigon.

Jim: Okay. Did you have any sense about the political disarray, because you were there—

Dave: Yes, yes. In fact, right before I got there--and the guys were still talking about it, the CIA was involved in an attempt to overthrow Diem. And there was actual--Vietnamese aircraft were involved, but some of these guys claimed that they saw American pilots in the planes.

Jim: Speaking of American pilots, did you see any American pilots operating out of Tan Son Nhut?

- Dave: Yeah, there was Americans operating—uh, not—Depends on when you're talking, if you're talking '62 or you're talking—
- Jim: Well, we're in '62 right now, the first three months.
- Dave: No, I didn't. The only thing that was operating there was a helicopter unit; American helicopter unit that was not too far from where our barracks was. I know it was very hard to sleep in the morning when they were cranking up those—these were the old—
- Jim: Banana w--?
- Dave: Banana birds, which probably were manufactured in forty-something. [laughs] It seemed like--this is something that I guess I've got a little bit of a raw spot--all the military equipment I had access to had either been used in World War II or Korea. I had an M2 carbine that was unsafe to operate, and I went and bought myself, from the Special Forces, a Thompson submachine gun for \$5.00 in the Cosmoline. Uh, because we weren't to be armed, but we had a weapon: armament for personal protection if something gets bad. And this M2 carbine, when you go to the range, the operating rod would slip out of the slot. That's how worn the slot was. So—
- Jim: I'm going to turn the tape over. [End of Tape 1, Side A]
- Dave: The courier run to the American Embassy to pick up their--from what was copied by the Marines in the Embassy, at their intercept site, and I was issued a 45-caliber handgun, which I was not qualified to carry; never had one, with the whole belt and everything. But the procedure is, when you come with any weapon, when you come to the Embassy, you drop your clip, you empty the—
- Jim: Chamber.
- Dave: --chamber. Well I slipped and before I dropped the clip, it took the top round off and loaded it. And when I checked to clear, I took a--right off the side of the Embassy—bang!
- Jim: [Laughs]
- Dave: And four 50 caliber [laughs] machine guns. [David makes noise imitating sound of the guns] [both laugh] And two of us laid prone right on the floor, right in front of the Embassy, because we were sc--you know, these guys were a little tense, you know, being at the Embassy, and that's what I do remem--So, after that I got to carry, when we went on the run, I got to carry the carbine.

- Jim: Okay. When you went from Tan Son Nhut to the Embassy. that was a ways away?
- Dave: That was about a thirty-five minute ride, or something like that.
- Jim: Was that by jeep from downtown?
- Dave: In the downtown.
- Jim: South side, on the river, right?
- Dave: Yeah.
- Jim: This was not the Embassy that was in the famous pictures?
- Dave: This was the pre-bombing Embassy, yeah.
- Jim: Right, yeah. Okay, so is there anything else about the Saigon experience, before we go up country, that we should--?
- Dave: Uh, the-- [tape cuts out]. Okay, two of us went together.
- Jim: Were there any other American uniformed military in Saigon?
- Dave: Yes, there was. We said earlier that I went over on the State Department passport. The Americans started wearing their uniforms in April of 1962. Up until that time, everybody was civilian clothes no matter what unit they were in, unless they was a very few people that were attached to the MAAG headquarters. That's milit--, I can't remember, Military Assistance--
- Jim: Assistance Advisory Group.
- Dave: --Advisory Group. And these were the people that were running the show. But then, our unit was called the 3rd RRU, which was essentially a detachment of the 5th Field Station ASA out of Clark Air Force Base in the Philippines. [background noise, knock on the door] Just a minute. "Hello?" [tape shut off]
- Jim: We had the plumber come in. [laughs] We were talking about--I don't remember what we were talking about.
- Dave: I do. You asked a question about --you were talking about uniform personnel—



- Jim: Yeah, uniform personnel, yeah uniform personnel. So did you wear a uniform then, when you were--?
- Dave: Yes, yes. Wore a uniform all the time I was in Vietnam. Uh, being office-type personnel, I wore the khaki, the khakis, not the--Well let's see, up in Saigon, we wore the khakis. Up north then we wore the ODs [olive drabs]. And they were not camis [camouflage], they were just ODs.
- Jim: Okay, so is there anything else in the Saigon--Well did you see, like ever see Diem or Madame Nhu?
- Dave: No, no, not really. Didn't have opportunity to see those people, but we were very interested in the war, and so we read *Newsweek*, we read *Time Magazine*, things like that. And I remember thinking at the time that *Newsweek* had the more accurate coverage coming out of Vietnam. Well, I understand why, [unintelligible] having once last week, watching about the life of Henry—
- Jim: Kissinger?
- Dave: Luce.
- Jim: Oh, Luce! Oh, oh Henry Luce, yeah.
- Dave: Uh, because—
- Jim: Who was a *Time* magazine publisher.
- Dave: Owner, publisher, yeah. And his influence did not, you know, go until, you know, into later on into the '70s where things changed.
- Jim: Was there any terrorism in Saigon in this three-month period that you were there?
- Dave: I don't remember, but yes, it was happening in the country. There was terrorism going on. It wasn't happening to Americans. Now, this was what was really weird. There was like an unwritten rule. Americans didn't participate in combat or military operations against the Viet Cong or the Vietnamese and on the North. And, basically, supposedly, the North Vietnamese weren't down there except with their advisers. We knew better, but that's the way it operated. And so they didn't monkey with us.
- The time when Mr. Davis died in March of 1962, he was on a direction-finding team. And in direction-finding, you have special radio receivers that pick up on the signal, and you have--they were mounted on jeeps, and they were mobile, and they were looking for the small fry-type radio

receivers that don't send that many miles. And he was with--there was three Americans with--each protected by a platoon of armed troops, and they were ambushed. And, I think, only one of the group that he was with, only one Vietnamese survived. But what was supposedly ca--and it was hushed up, but one of his buddies from the other direction-finding team admitted before he came home that he was the only one that really fought. He had emptied three carbines before he died.

Jim: Whereabouts in Vietnam was that?

Dave: It was somewhere in the del-- , southern part—

Jim: Down in the delta, south, south of—

Dave: It was in the flat country in the southern part, yes.

Jim: Okay, let's take us out of Saigon. You were there until October of '62. Then where did you go and what happened?

Dave: Uh, I was transferred to our unit at Da Nang. And we were located right in the city of Da Nang, right in the old part of town.

Jim: Was it a lot of French influence there?

Dave: Yes. It was a beautiful city, definitely a lot of French influence. In fact, I had my first filet mignon in Da Nang [laughs].

Jim: How did you get from Saigon to Da Nang?

Dave: Flew.

Jim: Flew. What kind of a plane, do you remember?

Dave: Uh, C-- ? Oh, that's the plane that is mentioned in the book.

Jim: Okay.

Dave: That flight is where I was--and we should touch on that.

Jim: Yeah, we want to talk about that.

Dave: Uh, the date was October 12th, 1962. And myself—I was a PFC--and Sergeant Perry Pepler [?], I think his name was, but I can't be sure after this many years that was the correct name. But Perry and I flew up and this was kinda like a military commercial airline. The—

- Jim: Was this Air America?
- Dave: No, this was just United States Air Force.
- Jim: United States Air Force.
- Dave: It was United States Air Force—
- Jim: That's a DC-3?
- Dave: No, it was the old--
- Jim: C-119?
- Dave: I think, it was the one with the two tails?
- Jim: That'd be the C-119.
- Dave: Yeah, it was a C-119. It had a major--basically had been a hard--one of these hard-drinking pilots of the Air Force and been bumped and he was trying to get his time in. And he was a major, was the pilot, and he had a--second lieutenant was his copilot. There was, like, five or six of us going up to Da Nang, but we had to make a stop up in the highlands at some Special Forces—some little runway up there. A DC-3 had been shot up and couldn't--had lost an engine and couldn't take off. And we had an engine in the plane.
- Jim: So, you were bringing--
- Dave: And we took off, and they instructed us, "When we get there, we're gonna-- , the Load Master will instruct you what to do, but you're gonna have to help [loud background noise] on this because we aren't going to have any time." He says, "When I turn the plane around, you got so much time." He says, "The Load Master'll cut the straps, and you push this thing out." I mean it's on wheels and stuff. And we come into this air strip, and we looked down and "r-r-r-r-r-it" [David makes shooting noise] there's a big firefight going on down there. You know. You can hear, you can hear small-arms fire. So he didn't want any more time on the--and this guy was a fantastic pilot, because he come in, he brought us right in almost at the--we're over the runway, we're over the runway, and all of a sudden he just brings the nose up, and she goes "BANG" and stops. I mean, he stalled it for a quick stop; brakes, reverses one engine, and spins the plane around, "Everybody push." At the same time, he's pulling the throttles back—
- Jim: To go.

- Dave: If the Load Master hadn't grabbed me by the back of the neck, I'd been laying on the paving, tarmac.
- Jim: You've been with the Special Forces. [laughs]
- Dave: Because I was falling out and he just threw me back in. And we were off the ground, which seemed like in two hundred feet. And this was the flight that the gentleman that wrote the *Vietnam Diary* was on with us.
- Jim: Okay. Oh, he was on the flight and--
- Dave: He was on the flight, and now he had to be our age in 1962. Grey-haired, long stringy grey, looked like a hippie. Uh, wore [unintelligible].
- Jim: That would, that would put him in the early to mid-sixties for whoever's listening to this.
- Dave: [Laughs] Yeah, uh yeah.
- Jim: [Laughs] And he wrote the *Guadalcanal Diary*—
- Dave: *Guadalcanal Diary* was his first combat—
- Jim: And I can't say his name, but for the record we will get the right spelling and everything. [Transcriber's note: author is Richard Tregaskis]
- Dave: Yeah. And being--what was I at the time--20 years old, and you're indoctrinated, "Loose lips sink ships," and you're not, you know, and being involved in American security, or intelligence gathering, you kind of have it pounded into you, you don't say too much about it to anybody. And so that's kinda what comes out in the book, that, I didn't know, you know, I kind of avoided answering his questions [about] what I was doing, and what I did there. But I still remember him because his notes, he carried a ledger book that was probably twelve inches wide by eighteen inches long, and it had [unintelligible], and that's where he took his notes in. And, you know, like an old accounting ledger book, it was essentially what it was. And he had a hole drilled through it, and he had a chain around his neck, and that's where he--so if he, because this guy went out every place. He got his research wherever it was, you know, he wasn't afraid to go anywhere, so—
- Jim: Did you ever have any contact with him after that?
- Dave: No. I did not.
- Jim: Okay. What kind of clothes did he have on?

- Dave: He wore the rubber-tired sandals that the natives pretty much wore. And he had on pants that were--they were short. They were about here on his legs. And a Hawaiian shirt, and that was about it.
- Jim: Wore a hat?
- Dave: Yes, I believe he did have a kind of an Australian leather hat, as I remember, but I'm not positive of the hat. But I remember the hair was gray and dirty, and [both laugh] as I remember, he had somewhat of a beard.
- Jim: Did he carry a weapon?
- Dave: No, he did not.
- Jim: Oh. Did you have weapons on this trip?
- Dave: No, no.
- Jim: So they didn't tell you, if you got shot down, what you were going to do all on your own?
- Dave: No. [laughs]
- Jim: So, did anything happen between there and Da Nang?
- Dave: No, it was rather uneventful. [laughs]
- Jim: That was enough. Okay. So you get to Da Nang. Can you describe what—did you live in a compound or did you live--
- Dave: Yes, we did. Actually we lived in the Union Hall, or one of the unions somehow this was confiscated and it was just a big--what was the construction building—brick, or a plastered building and relatively high ceiling inside. No facilities inside. I remember we had to walk outside to some outdoor privies. That's what we had for toilet facilities there.
- Jim: Were they privies or did they have the fifty-five gallon drums?
- Dave: No, these were, these were, they were made with the, the hole in the--and the footmarks, what-you-gonna-call, but us Americans not being able to do that, they built a box [laughs] above them so that it looked, so, so--some poor [?] had to clean up the mess on a daily basis.
- Jim: So what you're saying is, Americans couldn't squat.

- Dave: [Laughs] Well, I think we probably could've if we'd tried to learn.
- Jim: Learned, yes. Okay so, uh, was there a mess hall there, too, in the compound?
- Dave: Uh—
- Jim: Or, how did you eat, or--?
- Dave: Nah, that was where the barracks was. The compound was probably three-four blocks away and that's where the mess hall was.
- Jim: Okay, so—
- Dave: And that was the operations area, and that was kind of a Vietnamese [*background noises*]— There was a villa-type building and our mess hall was literally a hog house; had been a hog house. I mean, you clean it up and that sorta thing, because everything's built out of brick and stuff was in town there. And then our guys operated out of deuce 'n' half [2-1/2-ton] trucks. We had three of them sitting side by side; the expanded vans and then the door there so we just walked one to the other. And two of them had radios in, and one of them was kind of the offices for Operations and the other stuff. The commander, and all the rest, stayed in the villa and had their offices—
- Jim: So, how many people were in this unit?
- Dave: At Da Nang I think we had about seventy-some guys up there.
- Jim: Okay. Uh, and what was your typical duty day there?
- Dave: Uh, again I worked third shift, but there I was alone and I had reports and stuff. I'd come in at 10:00 and work till 7:00 and, it took--I'm typing-challenged [laughs] so it was--you know, twenty words a minute was my top speed. So [it] took me a long time to pound out those reports.
- Jim: Okay. And so, was it the same type of work you were doing in Saigon?
- Dave: That we were doing in Saigon, except it was closer to the action. I mean, I could actually hear the guys typing in the other room and when a guy would hear somebody come up and say, "So-and-so is up." And somebody else would go and find the other end of the link cuz they were never on the same frequency. They weren't exchanging on the same frequency.

- Jim: Oh, okay. So, in other words, did you get to recognize, then, some of these transmissions if--?
- Dave: They got, the operators knew the transmitter and many times knew the operator just by their characteristics--how they handled the key.
- Jim: Great.
- Dave: You know, they'd have nicknames for some of these guys.
- Jim: Yeah. Did you have any sense of the locations of where these transmissions were taking place or was somebody else trying to find where—?
- Dave: There was, there was, yeah we knew--I can't--but we knew because of the people doing direction-finding. We knew about where these were. But they got smart later on when they were starting to get--early on, they used the direction-finding and would send ARVN out and say, "So-and-so's over here." Well pretty soon all they were, they were capturing was ammo boxes and [laughs], and later on they got smart, and they run their antennas, their broadcast antenna, with some land line and get it a ways away so that it was not giving up the unit. So I was amazed at the rapid change in things—tactics—that they were able to do.
- Jim: Was there any aerial surveillance for direction-finding or anything?
- Dave: There may have been, but I--you know--
- Jim: You weren't, not, not--
- Dave: —I wasn't connected.
- Jim: Uh, did you see any--you said that some of the messages came "in the clear." Did you ever have any of those come "in the clear" where--
- Dave: No, I didn't. Uh, I mean, there was just stuff that, uh--around holidays you'd get more of that stuff when people were sending greetings and they'd talk about their families [laughs] and stuff like that.
- Jim: Like Tet?
- Dave: Yeah, yeah, stuff like that, and Christmas and stuff like that.
- Jim: Did, uh, speaking of Tet and Christmas, did you get an R&R like later people did, or were you just there for a year?

- Dave: Uh, people managed to get R&R, uh, if they really wanted it. You know, you'd take a leave and went different places. There was buddies that went to Hong Kong; some guys went over to Bangkok. Uh, but I didn't, the only money I had is what Uncle Sam was paying you--
- Jim: Paying, yeah.
- Dave: And when you're getting eighty-some dollars [laughs] a month, that don't leave you too much money.
- Jim: So, did you get any combat pay or anything—
- Dave: No.
- Jim: Hazardous duty pay?
- Dave: No, there was no hazardous duty pay. They didn't want to admit that it was hazardous at that time.
- Jim: Right. Did you have any responsibilities for pulling guard duty or anything like that or did they have other people securing--?
- Dave: Uh, not until we got up to Phu Bai. At Phu Bai we did.
- Jim: Okay, well we'll talk about that when--I sense that that's after Da Nang, right?
- Dave: Yeah.
- Jim: Okay. So how long were you in Da Nang?
- Dave: From October of 1962 to February of 1963. And it seems to me it was the first week in February we moved the unit from Da Nang to Phu Bai.
- Jim: Okay. So you moved around the time of Tet. Do you have any impressions of the Vietnamese Tet the year that you were there?
- Dave: Just that it was a lotta lights, a big cele--you know, celebrations going on and stuff like that. But that was, you know, I don't remember it that much.
- Jim: Okay. Do you have any specific remembrances of Christmas or New Year's during your tour?
- Dave: Yeah, I was amazed at how, for Christmas, that they were so decorated with the little mini-lights and this sort of thing, the trees, and stuff like that. And I thought, thought that was somewhat odd, but, then again, in



Saigon, you had a heck of a lot of Christians. You know, the Catholic-- You know Diem's brother was a Cath--, was the archbishop of Vietnam.

Jim: Yeah and he was in Da Nang, wasn't he? Or wait, one year—

Dave: I--one year, yeah. And, in fact, it is this Catholic connection that, I think, our involvement grew as much as it did because John Kennedy— Diem spent time with the Kennedys in the '50s. Actually at Hyannis Port. So there was a personal relationship there between the Kennedys—

Jim: You want to answer that phone? [tape recorder turned off] The Catholic influence, could you talk a little about that in Vietnam and the Buddhists, if you saw anything going on.

Dave: Yes. The Buddhist insurrection or protest started while I was in Vietnam. The first burnings took place when I was in Vietnam. Uh, the first ones, I believe, were in Saigon. And then they reached kind of a peak up at Hue about mid-May of 1963. I remember it because my birthday was the 15th of May and I woke up at 4:00 in the morning when they flew the Black Guard, which was the elite battalion of the Vietnamese Army. Basically, their duty was to protect the President, and they flew—airplanes started arriving at the airstrip at Phu Bai about 4:00 in the morning and they never stopped till dark at night.

Jim: Were they American aircraft or Vietnamese?

Dave: I think they were Vietnamese aircraft. They were transport planes. They were smaller transport planes so it took them a long time, but they literally had two planes on the strip at all times. There was one landing at this end while one was taxiing off the other end, and on the other strip they were taking off and going back; making the round trip. And that was my 21st birthday in South Vietnam.

Jim: Okay. Is there anything more about Da Nang that we should cover? And then we gotta get up to Phu Bai.

David: Uh, you asked earlier about the people. We had a closer relationship with a group of people in Da Nang. Uh, there was one bar where we hung out. Uh, I don't imagine any of that's there any more. I imagine the country's changed so much, but it was kinda just like, it was like a square down in Da Nang, and this bar was just right off that square.

Jim: Do you remember what kind of beverages they served there, or brands?

Dave: Yeah "ba-ba-ba" [laughs].

Jim: Beer 33.

Dave: Beer 33.

Jim: It's now 333--

Dave: Oh.

Jim: --and they've got a brewery in Saigon that's just like a modern American brewery.

Dave: I'm sure. I remember that it was the only beer, at that time, that you drank, that you got the headache [laughs] before you even got the beer down. I mean, it was bad stuff.

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: Uh, we also had the General MacArthur San Miguel— [beer from the San Miguel Corporation in the Philippines, Andrés Soriano y Roxas, the company's president was commissioned as a colonel and served as an aide to General Douglas MacArthur.]

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: --was available to us. Uh--

Jim: Did they serve it cold or with ice?

Dave: You know, I don't remember how we drank it. I think they served it cold there cause that bar was specifically catering to—

Jim: Americans.

Dave: Americans, and specifically our group of Americans. Uh, there weren't many from other units in there. Uh—

Jim: Did you sense that there was any spying or—

Dave: Oh yeah. The girl that ran the bar, her husband was a colonel in the Viet Cong.

Jim: How do you know that?

Dave: She told us about it. [laughs]

Jim: Oh, okay.

Dave: She only saw him once or twice a year for the last, how--I would say, I was twenty at the time--she was a woman, she was a very beautiful woman, spoke English—that's why—spoke English as clear as you and I. So she was educated. So, there was a lot of—I'm sure that her job was exactly that.

Jim: Did your command caution you about "loose lips sinking ships," as it were, in this bar?

Dave: No, not that much. Uh, I think, in fact, we were, being ASA, you know, we had a picture of Ho Chi Minh hanging up in our bar and stuff like that. So we weren't [laughs]—You gotta realize that we were kind of the color cultural unit in the military there.

Jim: [unintelligible] [tape cuts out]. We were talking about the bar with the lady spy.

Dave: [Laughs] Or whatever she was.

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: But, in fact we would make her uncomfortable when we'd get good and liquored up and we'd start singing chants to Ho Chi Minh. And we all had the joke about, you know, the joke about Lyndon Johnson and how the guy got injured, and this is, well, they were across the road and he was hollering--guy hollers, guy hollers, "Ho Chi Minh sucks."

Jim: [Laughs]

Dave: Guy hollered back, "Lyndon Johnson sucks." [both laugh] He got run over by a truck shaking hands in the middle of the road! [both laugh] Although Lyndon was not my president at that time. But, we'd make her uncomfortable in some of the stuff we'd do. But we were just crazy. But most of the guys in my unit in Vietnam had some college. In fact, one of the guys that I was with had even got his--was pre-med from Syracuse. And he drove race cars on the weekends. He got in trouble once when he was at Fort Devens. He was not at Devens the time I was there, but he raced American Austin-Healey teams. Now, you remember the military; a three-day pass was a three-day pass. And what've you got, three hundred miles?

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: Well, he flew from Boston and got in a wreck in a race in San Diego and ended up in the hospital.

- Jim: So were most of these people, like you, enlistees that were dealing with the draft issue, or were they career people, or—
- Dave: They, no, there was very few career people that we were working with. And we drank like fishes. I mean, I was never that heavy of a drinker, cuz I can't handle it that well, but, to give you an idea, when we moved from Da Nang up to Phu Bai, when we first got up there, they sent about fifteen of us ahead of time to kind of get the compound prepared and work. There was a MAG detachment across the road where they'd let us come over and eat in their mess hall and drink in their club. And in one week--they had a bar that they had worked to stock--we cleaned them out. I mean, we were drinking—this was top-shelf brandies, wines, scotch, you name it. And they couldn't believe it. And then what really got them upset, is there was two Australian officers that were with them, a major and a captain, and they couldn't stand the American officers, so they'd hang out with us enlisted men.
- Jim: Speaking of American officers, do you have any impression about the officers that you worked with over there?
- Dave: I had good officers by and large. Now, in fact, you want to go down an interesting story, when I was stationed at Fort Devens, Massachusetts, Nelson Rockefeller was inaugurated, I believe, for a second term as governor; the end of the first term, but, this was in 1961 at New York. And he had a son that was in the National Guard and was activated and was serving time at Fort Devens. And Nelson Rockefeller wanted him to be home for the inauguration. I mean, now, this is going from Ayer, Massachusetts, to, uh—
- Jim: Albany, New York.
- Dave: Albany, New York, which is a straight shot. You know, you can drive it in four hours, three-four hours. And his commander turned him down; wouldn't give it. Well, you don't [laughs] say no to Nelson Rockefeller. I mean, within twelve hours, the orders were changed. The Pentagon ordered him to--
- Jim: Go to the inauguration.
- Dave: --go to the inauguration. And the captain was removed of his command and shipped to Vietnam.
- Jim: Whew!

Dave: And—[End of Tape 1, Side B]--was removed of his command and shipped to Vietnam.

Jim: Whew!

Dave: And I don't know what, this guy was a mustang.

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: He made his officer in combat in Korea. So I imagine this guy carried a lot of psychological—

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: If you make a battlefield promotion, you've seen some pretty hard stuff. So they shipped him to Vietnam and, believe it or not, that was the CO that I went under when I got to Saigon. And he was trying to run a SOP [standard operating procedure], military-type operation in a unit that was made up of all these intellectual misfits. And it wasn't working. And like I told you, I worked third shift. So our guys that worked the night shift, we come home in the morning, we go to the mess hall and eat, and we go to bed. And there was something put up on the bulletin board that everybody was supposed to be taking PT so many times a week. We never did. We just ignored it. I never even looked at the--never knew where the bulletin board was till that time. I'd been over there like a month or two. But, I mean, went to work and did my thing, stayed out of trouble, and they ignored us until that point in time. All of a sudden we're called in one morning, and we're standing before the CO and they're talking about bringing us up on charges for disobeying orders. And, "What, what're you talking about?" You know. And the executive officer was a seventeen-and-a-half-year-old second lieutenant. I mean, talk about a guy getting his face slapped. And he pushed this so far, and somebody, some of our guys, you know, have connections. You know, they didn't come from poor families. You know, David from the farm in Omro was probably down on the totem pole, but there was sons of doctors and well-placed people. Not that there was anybody in Congress, but they knew somebody. The Congressmen, to some of these people, probably were personal friends. Not mine--but, their parents. And, uh, they came in and we were actually, they started writ--, starting the process of five of six of us writing stuff on charges to do what was-- not a general court martial, but it was going to be a court martial, and I was--

Jim: Yeah, a special--

Dave: —A special court martial. And the Inspector General came in, and this guy lost his command, and they gave it to his second lieutenant. This guy, I

don't know where he ended up in the military, but he was [intelligible]. At seventeen and a half, he commanded respect of the men. It was unbelievable. He had a natural ability to command. I don't say he was a Patton, but he was the sorta guy that you would go through hell and high water for.

Jim: Did he go through OCS? Is that how he got to be a second--

Dave: He come up through the military schools, you know.

Jim: But at seventeen years old?

Dave: He got--but somehow he had gotten a commission. At the very minimum age that he could get it. And I served under him there for just a short time. And then he later came up north, and I got to know him a little better up there, and I was nothing but impressed. And I heard through the grapevine that he had impressed people all the way up to the commanding general of Vietnam. I mean, word of this guy. So I'm sure that if he didn't get killed somewhere along the way, he was gonna have a good career.

Jim: Distinguished career.

Dave: Yes.

Jim: Well, we should finish Da Nang and go to Phu Bai. Is there anything that we haven't talked about in Da Nang? We—

Dave: Uh, yeah, the relationship between the forces, American forces. Uh, we basically were supposed to be eating C-rations in Da Nang. But we didn't; we had a mess hall. The Marine Corps had unlimited A-rations and more meat and stuff than anybody could use. The Marines were in charge of-- had an air unit, a helicopter unit at the air base in Da Nang.

Jim: So that the Marines were aviation--

Dave: Aviation people, yeah, but they sat out there with their helicopters and—it was a helicopter unit—they sat out there with their helicopters and they didn't have good protective weapons. The biggest weapon they had, early on when I was up there, was a 30-caliber machine gun. And that they were uncomfortable with. So we ended up--and we had Special Forces up there. Special Forces had unlimited military weaponry, because they were equipped supposedly for Vietnamese units. And they literally had a compound somewhere up in that area, I never knew where it was, that had all these weapons. So, like I said, food was Marines. We had C-rations. Special Forces had weapons. So, C-rations, so many [sacks of?] C-rations would buy you a certain weapon. Certain weapons would buy you so

many Class-A rations. And that was the barter that went on in Da Nang. And, uh, I can remember that, one point in time, Christmas, we spent Christmas Day 1962 on the beach. We're out from Da Nang. Now, Da Nang is inland a little bit off of an estuary; the Navy--that land out to the east, basically a big sandbar is what it was--and that was where the Navy put their big base out there later. But this was all just kind of beach-type wild country when we went out there. And I remember body-surfing in the South China Sea on Christmas Day 1962.

Jim: Hmm. And was there any security concerns or anything like that?

Dave: No. I mean, honestly, no. I mean, you were concerned about these things to a certain extent, but no there wasn't a major thing, these--like I said, there was this unwritten rule that things didn't happen. And when we moved up to Phu Bai, and guys were setting up the antenna field for our reception antennas, they're out there one day working and all of a sudden there's this fire fight going on down the little valley. And it seems that some Viet Cong had snuck into an ARVN Compound and stole a couple trucks. And these guys were [laughs] trying to catch them. I mean, and these guys were sitting on the hillside. It was like watching a movie. And so, that's how damn crazy it was. What we were more afraid of when we were at Phu Bai is, we were in one compound, and it's set this way and there was an Army of Vietnam Training Battalion sitting next to us, and their compound faces like this. And what we were concerned with is that all you'd have to do is send one or two Viet Cong and then fire shots each way and we'd shoot each other up. We were really scared of that happening some night because we knew that there was infiltrators around.

Jim: Yeah. Uh, just for the record, we've got two compounds with some distance in between them with a valley, or some kind of terrain that--

Dave: Hundred, hundred yards one end, maybe three hundred yards at the other end. That's how close they were together, so it would have been immediate—

Jim: Fight.

Dave: Firing at my foxhole and your foxhole. It—

Jim: Okay, so, when did you go to Phu Bai and how long were you there?

Dave: Uh, went up in February of 1963 and I stayed there until I came home in June of 1963.

Jim: Okay. So, what was Phu Bai like then?

- Dave: Phu Bai was basically--the little village of Phu Bai was a river--a bridge crossing on a small river there. It was a place where the French had built an air base, airstrip. And when we went up, all the time I was there, American planes flew out of Phu Bai, but they never stayed there overnight. They always either went back to the ship or went back to Saigon, or wherever they went. But they didn't; they were afraid to leave them there because there wasn't security for them.
- Jim: So was it on the ocean, the airstrip, or--
- Dave: Um, no. Phu Bai is--it's in the ocean plain, but it's not right on the ocean. We couldn't see the ocean.
- Jim: So it's between Da Nang and—
- Dave: Da Nang and Hue.
- Jim: And Hue.
- Dave: Its seven kilo--, uh fourteen kilometers south and a little west of Hue.
- Jim: And later in the war that was a major, uh, air—
- Dave: Base. That was a big, well it was a natural. It was relatively flat ground, and we were right behind us the little foothills and stuff started going up to the mountains.
- Jim: So what kind of a perimeter was there at Phu Bai? You've described these two compounds, and they—
- Dave: Basically the perimeter was a woven wire and barbed wire fence, like basically to control cattle more than to control--it wasn't a big concertina-wire thing or anything like that.
- Jim: Were there any fighting bunkers or fighting positions?
- Dave: We had dug foxholes around and it was one of the memories that's stayed with me all these years that I tell my kids about and stuff is that—remember that I said earlier in the interview that it was only short timers that got--well, when I was getting short, I started to have that nervousness about me. And our warning if anything was going off was that the CQ would blow a deuce-and-half horn. I mean, that sound. Well, there was a little narrow-gauge railroad that ran past the front of the compound. Maybe 300 yards down there was a little narrow-gauge railroad ran by there; just a small diesel engine. And when he comes to the cross, our crossing, you know, "whoo-hoot," sounds just like a 'deuce-and-half'



blowing its horn. And one morning when I'm just--this goes off, and I just crack, wake up, and I just roll off the top bunk, and I reach up on top of the mahogany wall-locker that's there and grabbed about--I had the banana clips taped together--I grabbed a bunch of those, reached in, grabbed my carbine and my Thompson, and all I got on is a pair of skivvies, and I'm out the door. [Jim laughs] And a steel pot, I did grab a steel pot. And I'm heading for the nearest foxhole. And I get about eight steps out the door and the whole place cracks up behind me. [Jim laughs] And that's when I come to, to realize what was going on.

Jim: Did you ever have to go on any patrols when you were in Phu Bai?

Dave: No, did not. We were not, really, we were not a combatant—

Jim: Okay. So what was your job and what was your duty day at Phu Bai?

Dave: Same as it was before at Da Nang--day-in, day-out.

Jim: Okay. And did anything particular happen there that was unique, you know, in the radio intercepts or anything like that?

Dave: Uh, we had, and I don't remember whether this happened at, I think this still happened when we were at Da Nang. There, one of the permanent stations for the radio intercept, one of the radio intercept trucks stayed somewhere out on the air base at Da Nang. I don't know where the others were. And one night, we hear this call. A guy's in there screaming, "I'm being attacked! I'm being attacked!" Well what nobody informed us is that ARVN was conducting night maneuvers and they were [laughs] coming right through where his little three-quarter-ton truck was sitting, and there he was in the line of fire! [laughs]

Jim: Oh, my! Oh, my!

Dave: [Laughs] And so, what do we do? We right—you know, we get on the radio and it to Saigon—so we right quick write up this report, put it on the emergency, and take it over to the Com Center. It's right, it was on President Kennedy's desk by the morning. [both laugh] But then we had--to—

Jim: Rescind it.

Dave: Say, "Sorry!"

Jim: "Sorry." Those things. Uh, did you have any particular contact with the ARVN?

- Dave: No, no. Not my being only a PFC, no. The officers did.
- Jim: Right.
- Dave: Uh, the unique thing about the field station up at Phu Bai was that it was not just Army, United States A--. It was also manned by Marines of the Naval Security Group, which was their counterpart. And these guys came from Hawaii, and instead of troops being rotated in individually, they would rotate a whole company, you know, at a time. So you have about 100 guys would come in at once. And, I don't know if you experienced this when you were in Vietnam, but we started seeing when you were there about six weeks, you'd go through "the crazies." You'd get, you'd just kinda get, "I don't give a shit," and you'd get drunk, and you'd do absolutely stupid things, and well, our problem was, is these Marines would all, it would take about, it was really about a three-four day period in there it would happen. And these Marines would all go through it—
- Jim: At the same time.
- Dave: Same time. And we went through that twice with two different groups when I was over there. And you had to be careful, because fights would break out and stuff would happen. But one of the neat things was, is that, uh, out of that experience, I smoked cigars with the commandant of the Marine Corps one night. [whistles] Honest to gosh, he was over checking on the troops, on his troops. And he come in, and I wasn't even working. I just came in cause it was, you were bored—just for something to do, I went in and was just helping for I wasn't on duty. So I was sitting there like you, civilian clothes, and come in start talking to him, asked him some questions and stuff and he asked me about different things. I don't remember too much. But really enjoyed talking to the man, and he pulls out this rope of a cigar, and he unpeels it, and it's three cigars twisted together, something he picked up in the Philippines. And he says, "You want one?" "Sure, Colonel, yeah, sure." Best cigar I ever had in my life. I mean, I don't smoke anymore, but it was just an absolutely wonderful cigar. I mean, some places it was almost, it was like a twisted thing, and almost flat like a--but it was great. And—
- Jim: Do you remember his name?
- Dave: My son has figured out, my son is a major in the Marine Corps now, and he's figured out who the guy was. I'm thinking Shoup [David Mason Shoup] rings a bell, but I'm not confident.
- Jim: Yeah. It wasn't [Commandant General Charles] Krulack?
- Dave: No.

Jim: It was probably Shoup.

Dave: Shoup. Because it was before the big—

Jim: Yeah, buildup.

Dave: Buildup. That didn't happen till after I got back in the States.

Jim: Okay.

Dave: The Tonkin Gulf.

Jim: Okay, or is there any other memories of the Phu Bai area that--?

Dave: Well, like I said, the Buddhist Riots and that sort of thing. And I remember saying to my friends--before I left Vietnam, I made a prediction. I says, "Diem is going to be gone within six months." And he was. And within six months after that, we're going to be asked to leave. And, that part didn't happen because the people that replaced him weren't that smart. [laughs]

Jim: Yeah. Well, maybe we were asked to leave and didn't choose to [laughs].

Dave: That could have happened.

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: And, you know, a short time after that, John Kennedy was assassinated.

Jim: Right.

Dave: And I definitely, I still in my heart of hearts feel that if Kennedy had remained president we probably would not have made it the major thing it was.

Jim: No.

Dave: Not to disparage President Johnson, because, you know, he sacrificed his political career over that war, so--

Jim: Yeah. You've kind of taken me out of sequence, but you've just talked about how you feel about the war. I want to just follow up on that. What was your impressions of the war, you know, and you went to college after that, and, you know, subsequent to that? What are your feelings about it?

Dave: I do not feel that the war was unnecessary. If you look at it from 2000 perspective, yes, it was. But in the thinking of the Cold War, and the alternatives that seemed to exist at that time, it was either nuclear or these little brush wars that were fought in different places. And the communists were actually trying to use the wars of liberation to expand and not be involved in a major conflict. I think they knew that the American military, you give them a big war, they're unbeatable. But we're finding again in Iraq, we don't really understand how to, we're not good occupiers. We weren't in Europe, and we weren't in Japan either, and where we beat the pants off of people. I recently read *The Band of Brothers*, my kids bought me the video and I learned so much about the American military. You know, the Germans were absolutely flabbergasted as they were surrendering to the Americans at the end of the war; these ragtag, dirty, undisciplined people that had destroyed this well-disciplined army. But part of it was that, like the Airborne was, is that Americans don't think that this is my job, and that's your job. The American military was trained that if you're shot, and you're a machine gunner, it's my job to pick the machine gun up and keep firing. And what happened--that's what happened on D-Day, I mean, you think about it, the band of brothers with E Company, about fifteen people out of E Company, you know, were the ones that won the awards because they're the only ones that were left, that were organized enough to go and they took these guns out and allowed Utah Beach to become secure.

Jim: Right, right, right. Uh, so, let's go back to Vietnam now. You concluded your tour. How did you leave the country?

Dave: Uh, flew from Phu Bai, down to Da Nang, to Tan Son Nhut. Oh there you asked about Air America.

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: I did fly Air America back from up there. And this was Thai pilots. And it was like you were flying with Errol Flynn, you know, the black leather jacket, the white scarf thrown over the back, [both laugh] the hat crushed down on the side. And I remember the thoughts of that flight, because we flew pretty much a straight line. So we probably got almost over Laos in points in the highlands. And I just was awestruck with the awesome beauty of those mountains. And it bothered me later on when I knew the bombing, and the napalming, and everything that we did. It's paradise and they're just destroying it.

Jim: Yeah.

Dave: And I remember that's thoughts that I had up there.

Jim: Did you rotate out with some people that you knew, or did you go back to the United States on your own?

Dave: There was a--I'm trying to think-- It seems to me, of the five of us that went over together, we all came back, or not all of us cuz a couple guys extended instead of--and to get their military obligation done. If you extended for six months, then when you came home you were done. Otherwise, we had in excess of a year to go.

Jim: Okay. What was the reception to you when you got back to the United States and to Omro and whatever?

Dave: "YYAAWWNN" "Vietnam? Is that some island over there?" [laughs] I remember a guy who was a World War II vet cut my hair when I came home and asked me—and people just--it's like now. The war, at that stage, the war wasn't even on the conscious level. Of course it wasn't a war, really. I mean, it didn't become a war until late '64 and early '65.

Jim: What was your reaction to the protests that happened in Wisconsin in the late '60s and early '70s to the war?

Dave: Well, I guess I understood it. I listened to Lyndon Johnson's Tonkin Gulf speech in my car outside a school of nursing up in Tacoma, Washington. I picked a girl up for a date that night, a student nurse. And I remember after he got done speaking, I remember looking at her and saying, "How do you feel about going to Canada?" Because our unit went up to twenty-four hour notice that we were going. And I didn't want to go back to Nam. I mean, I did my time. I did my time, but I didn't--personally, when you're thinking about your own skin, I didn't want to go back there again. I didn't have that kind of patriotism or fervor. But that, our unit ended up staying on high alert for I don't know how long. I got out of the service; the day that it came through--the orders to go up to be ready to leave within forty-eight hours--my "early out" orders for college had come through dated the day before.

Jim: I've got to turn—[**tape ends abruptly**]

[**End of Interview**]