

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
DOUGLAS C. ZWANK
Bulk Fuel, Marine Corps, Vietnam War
1996

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Zwank, Douglas C., (b. 1947). Oral History Interview, 1996.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (ca. 79 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassettes (ca. 79 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Military papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder)

Abstract:

Douglas C. Zwank, a Madison, Wisconsin native, discusses his service in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War. Zwank graduated from Edgewood High School in 1965 and went to the University of Wisconsin. Zwank recalls becoming aware of the Vietnam War in 1963 when an acquaintance, Rocky Versace, was captured by the North Vietnamese and later executed. In 1966, Zwank dropped out of college and joined the Marine Corps. He mentions his correspondence with a friend serving in Vietnam inspired both envy and guilt in Zwank, prompting him to enlist. He reveals his parents reacted negatively to his enlistment, preferring Zwank finish college. He describes in detail his enlistment: the physical exam, IQ testing, haircut, and the "Buddy Plan." Zwank was sent to San Diego (California) for basic training; it was his first trip outside Wisconsin. He characterizes the boot camp experience as "part fear and part pride that you could survive." Next, he analyzes his fellow Marines: volunteers were separated from draftees during basic training; however, Zwank states his volunteer unit included juvenile delinquents who had chosen the military over prison. He feels basic training was an "awakening experience." Serving with African Americans from the South and troops from poor socioeconomic backgrounds revealed to Zwank the extent of discrimination in the U.S. After boot camp, Zwank attended Infantry Training at Camp Pendleton (California) where he learned basic fighting and tactics. Zwank was then assigned an occupation specialty in Bulk Fuel, transporting gas to the frontlines. He was initially disappointed, explaining: "if you weren't a grunt, it was an embarrassment because everybody was so conditioned to be infantry." In summer 1967, during his Bulk Fuel training at Camp Pendleton, Zwank joined a regimental football team. He implies he was promoted to corporal because he blocked for his lieutenant, a former All-American college football star. After a year at Camp Pendleton, Zwank reveals he was worried he would not be called to Vietnam. He emphasizes that fighting in Vietnam was the goal of his service. In September 1967, Zwank got his wish and was assigned to Vietnam. He outlines his journey on a commercial jet via California, Hawaii, and Okinawa (Japan). Zwank describes landing in Chu Lai (Vietnam) on his nineteenth birthday and being surprised to find it was "like any other place in the world" with very few signs of war. He was then stationed in Phu Bai. He relates his job in Bulk Fuel put him in contact with South Vietnamese civilians, mostly older women, who taught him about Vietnamese culture. Zwank discusses at length transporting different types of fuel from tanks on Cocoa Island to an outpost in Hue using Mike boats and pipelines. His duties also included guarding fuel tanks against attacks. Zwank describes how the war escalated dramatically after the Tet Offensive in 1968. On the eve of the Tet Offensive, Zwank was

on detail in Hue, but he returned to Phu Bai the afternoon before the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) attacked. Before Tet, Zwank claims he never heard shooting or saw dead bodies. He describes the city of Hue as having a "fullblown economy," a new university, and a vibrant nightlife. Zwank explains that when the NVA attacked, a group of ten or fifteen Marines in his Bulk Fuel unit were stranded in Hue. He praises the Navy Seabees for their heroics in rescuing the stranded Marines. Meanwhile, the base at Phu Bai was rocketed all night, and Zwank took cover in trenches. According to Zwank, when he returned to Hue after the Tet Offensive, the "devastation was incredible." A Catholic cathedral and the university had been destroyed by the NVA, and students were killed at their desks. Zwank also relates a few instances where his fuel truck was ambushed by the NVA. He feels the most difficult part of the war was that "there was never closure"-- his buddies would drive off in a truck in the morning and never return. Zwank comments that strong bonds formed in a short period of time between Marines regardless of ethnic and socioeconomic background. Zwank also discusses drug and alcohol use at length. He states marijuana use was very common and claims one Marine reenlisted twice because of the cheap, high quality marijuana in Vietnam. Zwank implies smoking marijuana was a response to low morale after the Tet Offensive. Zwank admits to drinking a lot during the Vietnam War and mentions he used to trade fuel for alcohol with the Seabees and the Vietnamese. He also touches upon racial tensions, describing an incident where a White Marine stabbed a Black Marine in the shoulder. Zwank remarks that one of his best friends in the Marine Corps was Mexican and that there were no racial tensions when Marines were on duty--only during downtime. He states that the African American troops mostly "stayed to themselves." Zwank briefly comments on racial slurs used by some Marines towards the Vietnamese but states he found the Vietnamese to be "creative, energetic, and hardworking." Zwank reports he did not have access to American news media, so he did not realize how divided U.S. citizens were about the war. In March 1968, Lyndon Johnson stopped the bombing of North Vietnam, which Zwank reports angered the Marines. Zwank began to realize that the U.S. was meddling in a civil war. He says he respected the NVA and Viet Cong as fighters and "felt sorry for the Vietnamese people." Zwank admits his views of the war changed after talking to South Vietnamese civilians who supported Ho Chi Minh. Zwank reveals that he came to realize the role of French colonialism in the plight of Vietnam and feel that, if left alone, the Vietnamese would have unified under Ho Chi Minh and eventually given up communism. Zwank compares the Vietnam War to conflicts in Bosnia and Grenada and shares his stance that the U.S. should not intervene in civil wars in other countries. Zwank graphically describes seeing air assaults, a napalm drop that destroyed a forest, crop destruction caused by Agent Orange, and mutilated corpses of South Vietnamese casualties. As the end of his tour approached, Zwank remarks he became "crusty and hardened" towards nightly rocket attacks. Zwank tells a story of getting drunk one night and mouthing back to a gunnery sergeant, saying "I'd give up my citizenship before I'd put in another year in this place." Zwank returned home in August 1968 and was discharged just after Labor Day. Ten days after his discharge, Zwank was sitting in a classroom at the University of Wisconsin. He used the G.I. Bill to finish his B.A. and, later on, get an M.A. in public administration. He calls returning to school so soon after serving in Vietnam a mistake and expresses frustration at the immaturity of his classmates and anti-

war protestors. Zwank states he became a target of rage, resentment, and protest, reflecting: "I realized that this thing I accomplished, that I had this pride in, was something to be ashamed of by their standards and that I had to hide." Zwank discusses readjusting to civilian life and meeting his wife shortly after his homecoming. He feels losing the "adrenaline high" of the Marines was the hardest part of returning to the States. Zwank suggests searching for the adrenaline rush led to his career as a narcotics agent. He feels fortunate compared to other Vietnam veterans who were unable to readjust after the war. Zwank repeatedly emphasizes that he holds an anti-war stance today, but he also states going to Vietnam taught him self-confidence, discipline, and empathy for people in underprivileged, developing nations.

Biographical Sketch:

Zwank (b.1947) has long family ties to Madison, Wisconsin. His great-great grandfather, a mason, helped build the State Capitol in the 1880s. Zwank graduated from Edgewood High School and spent a year at the University of Wisconsin before joining the Marine Corps in 1966. On his nineteenth birthday, Zwank arrived in Vietnam, where he served as a Corporal in Bulk Fuel. When his tour ended in 1968, Zwank returned to UW-Madison, where he met his wife. He worked as a narcotics agent for the Division of Criminal Investigation for the State of Wisconsin for eighteen years. In the 1990s, he became a computer systems manager for a federal agency. He now lives in Middleton, Wisconsin.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1996.

Transcribed by Joanna Glen, 1998.

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Interview Transcript:

Mark: Today's date is January 5, 1996. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this afternoon with Mr. Douglas Zwank, a veteran of the Vietnam conflict and our first veteran of 1996. Thanks for coming in on an extremely cold day, to come talk about the past. I suppose we should start at the beginning as they say. Why don't you tell me a little about where you were born and raised and what you were doing prior to your entry into the service.

Zwank: I was born here in Madison on November 9, 1947 and my family goes way back to my great-great grandfather immigrated here from somewhere in Europe in 1850 and he was a mason. He died building the State Capitol in I think it was 1883 or 1887. So my roots are here in Madison. I attended public schools, graduated from Edgewood High School in 1965. Madison was a much different town back then than it is right now.

Mark: In what ways?

Zwank: Well, it was smaller and most of the people that, or not most, but a lot of the people that you met, grew up in Madison and now there are a lot more people that grew up in other places that have moved here, come to school and it is a great town, so--

Mark: When did you actually enter the military?

Zwank: Well, out of high school I went to the University for a year here in Madison and during that time period there were the Dow protests and Vietnam was starting to escalate.

Mark: That's what I was going to start getting at. You grew up in a town that was noted for not being particularly pro-war and I'm interested in how that perhaps shaped your views of the war and also having gone to Edgewood College.

Zwank: Edgewood High School

Mark: It's a Catholic school and the Catholic church had a, some people viewed it anyway as having a--how do I want to say this?-- a sometimes a hawkish stance on the war. I'm interested in perhaps how these sorts of things influenced how you viewed the Vietnam War before you actually got there.

Zwank: Well, it was kind of interesting. My first recollection of Vietnam was probably in about 1963 when there would be short spots on the national news and I was about a sophomore in high school. In fact, my youngest son right now is a sophomore in high school and I relate a lot of what I went through

with where he's at and the way Bosnia is shaping up right now and, prior to that, the war in Saudi Arabia which I am very strongly against all military intervention as a result of my experience, especially having sons. But at the time I was growing up, Vietnam started about '63. Then my next major recollection was that one of the first pilots shot down over Vietnam was a guy named Rocky Versace who was a Madison native and he, in fact, was my altar boy instructor when I was growing up and he was a graduate of I believe of Edgewood. His brother was a part-time coach over there, Dick Versace and the North Vietnamese I believe my senior year they marched him through Hanoi and then he was later executed, so at that point, Vietnam started to be more than just a little blip on the national news and it started to take shape. As far as my high school experience, it wasn't really significant enough other than Rocky Versace was executed, they announced it over our PA and there was a prayer and it was noted, but other than that we didn't really discuss the war in high school. At Edgewood we did spend our senior year looking at social causes and our responsibility to the rest of the world and to various groups in helping them and I think to some degree that shaped my – gave me a sense of obligation that you know being an American and with so much that I did have a responsibility to other peoples and when I did enlist that was not the significant factor, but it was something that, you know, I thought about and so it did influence me.

Mark: And life at the UW campus here, how was --

Zwank: Well, it was fun. I was living at home and I was expected to go to college, I had good grades in high school. I was a pretty good student. I did the normal kinds of things, got in trouble for but it was just assumed that I would go on to college after I graduated and I did and I was initially planning a pre-med curriculum. I wanted to be a doctor like about 9,000 other students at that time period and as the year went on my grades were okay but they weren't good enough to compete at the level I needed to compete at that time. I realized it and I also realized I just didn't have the interest, the drive. The protests were going on, or starting then, the Dow Chemical was recruiting employees on campus and all of this time, a friend of mine, he's actually a distant cousin, we grew up together and he was close to me like a brother and out of high school he enlisted in the Marine Corps and he went in the Marine Corps in August of '65 when I started college and so this whole time we're corresponding and he was going through boot camp and things and in March of '66, he was involved in an amphibious landing in Vietnam and I started to feel both a little bit of envy because of what seemed like a very exciting adventurous thing, seeing he was involved in it and I also felt a little guilty because I had a deferment and I realized at that point there were a lot of people that didn't have deferments so it gnawed at me that I was sitting back here in town. The need to get away from home, my parents, I was raised to grow up and spread my wings and my parents still wanted to exert their influence, they

did in high school, so all of these things sort of came together and after my first full year I had heard that the Marine Corps had two-year enlistments so I went up to the recruiter sometime in June and talked to him and he said no, they only had three and four year enlistments. So I said well, I'll stay in school. That night he called me and said that they had just got a new quota of two-year enlistments and would I still be interested. I enlisted without telling my parents which was very intentional because my mother would have had an impossible time dealing with it if I hadn't already committed myself and my father would not have been supportive either. They were very intent on me finishing college so I enlisted and then I told them and that was a hard thing.

Mark: They didn't take the news terribly well?

Zwank: No. But. --

Mark: I'm also interested in Marine Corps, besides the two-year enlistments, that's not exactly an organization known for taking it easy, and this is the quintessential military experience for young American men. Were there any other reasons why you selected the Marine Corps over say the Army or the Navy or Air Force?

Zwank: Well, you know, I guess a lot of the John Wayne movies, you know, when I was growing up. I think they really do have an influence. And my cousin's father was in the Marines in World War II and he was kind of a second father figure for me. So when the time came, it just seemed like if I was going to Vietnam I wanted to go with the best and I don't regret that decision at all. The Marine Corps has a long history, a very proud history and, I guess, you know, it was very appealing at that time. Anyway, I enlisted for two years and after I enlisted I found out that three of my friends had also enlisted and they had what they called "The Buddy Plan" where they guarantee you stay together through boot camp so the four of us went off together in September of '66 into the Marine Corps.

Mark: I was just going to ask you to trace me through those steps. I suspect you had to report to an induction center in Milwaukee or something and you got on a train to Paris Island or San Diego, one of the two, I'm sure. Why don't you just trace me through the steps of your induction into the service.

Zwank: Sometime after I enlisted I had to go down to Milwaukee and take a physical and that was just a bus trip down and stayed at some sleazy hotel in downtown Milwaukee and had the physical and passed it. It was just like they show in the movies, long line of guys and you stand there naked and they kind of like cattle being inspected, but we all, most of us passed and you take like an IQ test and that came back and I was notified I'd been accepted and my friends had gone through that process separately and we got our starting dates

conformed so that we'd go off together, and then we left Madison about 5:00 in the morning and my cousin's father drove us down to Milwaukee and we reported to the Induction Center and they processed some things and we basically sat around for the whole day and about 9:00 at night or sometime very late, they took us to the airport and put us on a civilian commercial plane into San Diego. We flew out to San Diego and there were quite a few other Marines going out to boot camp, not the whole flight, but probably twenty of us. On the way out for a lot, for me it was my first airplane ride, it was my first trip out of Wisconsin, so it was a lot of – for a mid-west kid that you know mainly had grown up in Madison it was quite an adventure. Flying out there I mean we were very cocky, we thought we were going to go off and finish the war in Vietnam and tame the Marine Corps and do a lot of other things. I think one of the funny parts, I always grin about is when we got off the plane in San Diego there was a D.I. in dress blues standing at the end of the stairway going down to the tarmac and he was picking us out just as we walked down the thing. I mean, we were obviously young and he was not smiling and friendly, warm greeting. It was kind of like, they had a way of addressing people that put you in very basic terms, but “get over there” and you know “in that formation.” So we did. It was again, late at night. It had to be towards 11:00-12:00 midnight. We got in formation and this Marine told us if we had any candy, cigarettes or any “pogey bait” that we were supposed to put them in this big trash can there.

Mark: “Pogey bait.” That's a term I'm not familiar with.

Zwank: It's just like candy or snacks or anything that you'd eat. Snack food basically. A guy next to me was chewing a piece of gum. We were supposed to spit out gum. The guy next to me was chewing a piece of gum and kind of cocky and I didn't know who he was but the D.I. walked over and kind of gave him a little tap to the solar plexus and bent him over and the gum came flying out and at that point, that trash can almost filled a quarter of the way with cigarettes – people took note and were a little more intimidated and from then on it got to be a real interesting experience and they told us not to talk. We got on a like a school bus. We were transported to San Diego. We got there very late but the barbershop was waiting for us. They put us in painted foot prints that you see in a lot of the documentaries and at this point, we were not talking, most of us were pretty well intimidated and the D.I.s were in control. If anybody did anything other than what we were supposed to, the D.I. would get up in their face and yell and in some cases give them a little tap. We called it “thumping”. You used to get thumped pretty regularly back then. Not anything that would cause any injury or was all that painful but it did get your attention and it was part of the tradition and everybody accepted it. So they yelled, “Put your fingers on any moles or warts on your head as you walk in and so some guys walked in with all ten fingers on their head and some had none and you go on and sit in a chair and they just shaved your head. You go

back , stand outside and after everybody did that we went to a supply warehouse and they gave us a duffel bag and you ask for your sizes and they give you a pair of utility pants and a shirt.

Mark: Did they fit?

Zwank: Mine fit fortunately, but they weren't too concerned about whether they fit. They'd give you the closest they had to your size and some of the smaller guys came out with some pretty baggy stuff on. I was big enough that they had my size. Fortunately, my feet are big and they had my boot size too. So we got just the basic issue to get us started and a blanket. Then they walked us over to a Quonset hut and it was fairly cool by this time and we had changed into our utilities and looked pretty ragged. We got into this Quonset hut about 3:30 in the morning and we were dead tired and probably a little scared and wondering what kind of mistake did we make in our life and they put us in these bunks, double stacked metal bunks with a mattress, no blankets or sheets and they just told us "Get in bed. " They didn't give us a chance to get blankets or sheets. There was a pillow without a pillow case on and so I was kind of laying there, very tired, very hungry, giving serious thought to the mistake that I had made at that point and I was freezing so I was starting to get out of the top bunk to get a blanket so I could get warm and the D.I. must have been down on the end because all of a sudden the light came on and an empty garbage can came flying down on the concrete banging around and he said, Can I be graphic here?

Mark: Oh, you can be a graphic as you like.

Zwank: "Who the fuck told you you could get a blanket?" At that point, I realized I was no longer in control of my life and now I can look back and laugh about it but at that point I was even more intimidated and we laid there for what seemed like forever and I couldn't sleep and I was just starting to fall asleep and the lights came on again and they told us get up, we're going to breakfast. It was very dark, it was probably about 4:30 in the morning We got up, went over, by this time I was starving. I filled my tray and they had a big sign over the buffet area that said to take as much as you want, but eat all that you take which is kind of a tradition in the Marines. So I filled up my tray with scrambled eggs, and toast, and hash browns and I sat down, at, they had long benches and started eating and I didn't hardly have three spoonfuls of food in my mouth and the D. I. was yelling to "Get Up, Get Up, and Get out!" so we go running out at that point, trying to shovel food in our mouth and it was all part of the initiation, just to kind of impress the fact that they were in control and that we had to follow. After that, it got better and we kind of learned the routine and as we were a nine-week boot camp, as it went on they gave us more privileges, but right up till the very end you really didn't have even the ability to go to the bathroom when you had to. You had to ask for permission,

to get a drink of water, the very basic things like that. There were a lot of fun things that I look back and laugh about now but at the time it was part fear and part pride that you could survive and all that sort of a routine.

Mark: What sort of guys were joining the Marine Corps at the time? I assume they were all volunteers, there were very few draftees.

Zwank: At this point, they were drafting too so there were a few. They tried to separate the draftees from the volunteers pretty much so in my platoon, they were all volunteers. We were all very young. I was 18 and we had a lot of 17-year-olds in our platoon. Quite a few guys were kids out of big cities that had gotten in trouble and the judges back then were giving them the option of going to jail or going into the service for two years or more so in my platoon of 60-some guys, I think there were about five guys from big cities, a couple from Detroit that got in trouble and that was why they were there. Not all of us were there as pure volunteers. There were also a few people like me that were kids that started out in college and realized that it was just not the right thing at that time and had dropped out. There were an awful lot of kids that were high school dropouts. There were a lot of kids from poor areas, a lot of Black guys from the South from very poor backgrounds and up until that point, I really didn't have any idea of how poor and how much discrimination there was in our country and I kind of assumed every place was like Madison and like the television shows in the 60's and, so it was a pretty awakening experience for me to talk to some of these people from other parts of the country that had grown up in much more desperate conditions.

Mark: And how did all these people from these different sorts of economic and ethnic backgrounds all get along? Was it a problem or was it not a problem?

Zwank: In boot camp it was incredible. There was a kind of a bond that forms. I guess it's like other things where you're in an adverse situation and you all come together and in a very short period of time there are bonds that form between people that in other places in other times would never occur. They are very close bonds, almost like life-long friends or brothers and you could by the end of boot camp, with the exception of maybe a couple of people that really were not suited for the Marines, if you did something to one you did it to all and that was the end result of this training. The actual military skills were not that well ingrained as the notion that if you do it to one, you do it to all. If one fails, all fail and that you don't challenge orders or question that when you are told to do something, you do it quickly and as best you can, even if it's something that you don't particularly like or you don't think is the right thing to do you do it. I guess that's what the Marines were famous for. It's been good discipline, that's benefited me all my life and for that part of it I am very, very grateful.

Mark: Now you didn't end up the standard Marine rifleman. You ended up in a different field.

Zwank: Right. In bulk fuel which, yeah, it was different. I don't quite understand it but I know that when they do your IQ testing there is some assessing going on as to your skills and your potential. A lot of the guys that didn't have anything else to offer ended up in the Infantry and any of us that had some college, generally ended up in some of these special occupations. I guess now in hindsight it was fortunate for me.

Mark: At the time you didn't think that?

Zwank: At time I guess I really wanted the full experience. I went in expecting to go to Vietnam. I needed to go to Vietnam to fulfill my objective where I would have felt like I had wasted the two years. As part of that, I wanted to be in Infantry but all of this you have very little control over it and when the time comes you actually realize that, well, maybe this is not such a bad place to be also. I had a friend who went in a couple of years after me and he was a character, but he put down that he was a hunting and fishing guide in Wisconsin. He was about 19 years old when he went in and based on that experience they made him a forward observer which is a very risky place to be so it's kind of strange how you end up where you end up. I was bulk fuel and the idea is an amphibious military group would land on a beach and then as you move inland you have pipe, and rubber bladders, that you can carry your fuel forward with you so that the front line has all the fuel that they need and it's an interesting concept and we actually used the rubber bladders and a lot of the hose but we never did an amphibious assault in Vietnam where I was there where we landed on the beach and just kind of crept along. We had tank farms and we off-loaded – this will get into the Vietnam experience here, but we off- loaded fuel at Cocoa Island just outside Hue. In the big tankers there was a pipe that ran from out in the ocean that at a buoy that they could connect to and then they would off-load to Cocoa Island. Cocoa Island had big holding tanks and it was a combination Marine island base and a Navy base. Then on Cocoa Island they would off-load it from the big holding tanks onto Mike boats with rubber bladders inside of them and then they would convoy those Mike boats up the Perfume River to downtown Hue and we had a ramp there and then we had tank trucks that we would have waiting there and we would pump it off the Mike boats into the tankers and there were several different kinds of fuel that were needed in Vietnam. There was your "av gas", aviation fuel for your propeller planes, your JP jet fuel for the jets, there was diesel fuel for a lot of the vehicles, and then there was "mo gas" motor gas, just general, regular gasoline for other vehicles so we generally handled those four types of fuel. The jet fuel was very sensitive because if it got contaminated with even a little bit of diesel fuel, it could bring a jet plane down, so when we were handling that, we were very careful. Also, it was very

flammable as was aviation gas, compared to regular motor gas or diesel fuel and we would off-load and form up anywhere from five to ten - fifteen trucks into a convoy. We'd usually get in there right after the sun came up in the morning. We operated out of Phu Bai and Ja Lai which were bases just west of Hue and we would get in there early in the morning and it was safe in town then. Then we would off-load. We'd form up and we'd usually have a vehicle in the lead with a commanding officer and it'd have a 50 caliber mounted on a turret and then each truck would have a driver and then a shotgun with an M16 and the shotgun was always the quality control person for the fuel so the bulk fuel guys like myself, we were responsible for being the security person on the truck, but assuring that when the fuel was loaded and off-loaded that it didn't get contaminated and that was done so there was no serious risk to anybody from a fire explosion. We would haul to all of the bases around. At that time it seemed like we were driving 50 or 100 miles a day but probably we were driving maybe 10-20 miles tops. The roads were so bad, they were mainly dirt roads with a lot of pot holes and we couldn't travel that fast. A lot of the bridges were very in disrepair and we had to be very careful going over them.

Mark: And you were taking fuel to say an air base or a truck depot or something?

Zwank: Right. We'd take jet fuel back into Phu Bai. They had a jet landing strip there and kept jets and a lot of helicopters. I believe that helicopters used av gas. I'm not sure. But, anyway, there were helicopters there and then at that time there were quite a few Army groups and the I Corps and they had a lot of helicopter bases scattered around Hue and the furthest north we went was Quang Tree occasionally. We didn't go any further south than Phu Bai and then probably I think most of the bases were on Highway 1 directly north of Hue and for the jet bases we'd drop off motor fuel and diesel and the aviation or jet fuel whatever they used, I don't even remember now.

Mark: I want to come back. I want to talk about some of the security problems you may or may not have had, but I want to back-track a little bit back to basic training I suppose or wherever point it was that you were told that this was going to be your occupation in the Marine Corps. I'm interested in your reaction to that and what sort of specialized training you might have gone to afterwards.

Zwank: After boot camp you go to ITR which is your infantry training and that's where you really learn military tactics and you're out in the hills at Camp Pendleton and you learn the real fighting, basic fighting, tactics and skills that the Marines -the Marines say everybody is a grunt so they train everybody to do those. After ITR, it's a four -week training program, I was able to go home on Christmas leave and it was after ITR at the end of ITR that everybody gets their military occupational specialty assignment, MOS, and I got mine at that

point. Then I got my orders before I went home on leave to report back to Camp Pendleton to the Bulk Fuel School and some got into communications and most of them went into the Infantry, a few cooks and things like that, but at the end of ITR everybody found out what they were going to be. So coming back after leave you knew what you were going to be. I think at that point I was a little disappointed. Actually, if you weren't a grunt, it was kind of an embarrassment because at that point everybody was so conditioned to be Infantry that to be anything else carried a lot less lower status. In time, that distinction kind of wears off and in time you realize that you are very fortunate that you have an occupation specialty other than Infantry, but initially, it's a disappointment.

Mark: So you had to go to some sort of specialized training lasting probably a couple of months or so.

Zwank: Yeah. I think it was about four weeks, maybe eight weeks. I don't really remember. It was kind of a low point in my military experience because I didn't enjoy this Bulk Fuel at all. It was a kind of typical military where you get up early and rush to get someplace and then sit around for an hour waiting for someone to go up and a lot of the training in the military was geared for a very basic level so it got boring real quick. The hardest part was being able to stay alert enough to listen and pay attention and learn it. But it was at Camp Pendleton and at that point you had privileges after you put in your day you could go to the PX and buy cigarettes and there was a movie theater there and I had a friend from Madison here that was in a Communication School just up the road so we had a chance to get together every once in a while, write letters, things like that. But that time went real slow. Then after that training you get your assignment to your first duty station and most people either stayed in California to get ready to go to Vietnam or were then assigned to go over to Vietnam. A few of the guys got sent to some of the Marine air bases because all the air bases with any sort of aircraft have bulk field staff. So most of us either got stateside or go to Vietnam. Again, I was hoping I would get Vietnam at that point and I got sent to Camp Pendleton which was another kind of disappointment but I figured my time would come. I got into a platoon that was mostly guys that had been over to Vietnam and were now putting in their last year, year and a half, before they'd get out of the service and guys that were waiting to get their orders to go over. When I was in, in '66 to '68, there were about 300,000 Marines. There was 100,000 in Vietnam, 100,000 training and 100,000 in transit so for the most part you were either getting ready to go there or coming back. My time in California was long. It dragged on. It wasn't until late summer of '67 that I got on a football teams, a regimental football team and then they transferred me from the field up to the office and I did a training schedule in the morning and then at noon we'd go practice football and play football. It was 8-man tackle and each regiment had a team. There was about 8-12 teams on Camp Pendleton and our particular

regiment, we had two Reserve officers that had been activated for Vietnam and they'd both been teachers and one had been Assistant Football Coach at an eastern college so he actually knew something about coaching and we had a couple of guys that had been all-state football players in Ohio, my CO, a lieutenant., was a graduate of Boston College and he had been a little All American out there, a half-back. Him and I got along good. I played tackle and we had an outstanding team. We basically dominated the league and we had a lot of fun and I got a promotion out of it right away because I did the blocking for my lieutenant, so he wanted to make sure I was happy, I guess. We had a lot of fun though. Then as the training clerk, it was about September, they came in and they get quotas that they'd have to fill for people to go to Vietnam and I knew my time was running out because once I got over a year or with less than a year left to do, they wouldn't send you to Vietnam. So it was early September and they needed a list of all the people in our company that were eligible and my job was to identify them and give them a list, so they had these metal tags that you pulled and you stamped and it was a very primitive process compared to our computers today, but anyway, I took my tag and the first sheet was all my name listed down about twenty times and the rest of the sheets I put my name every other name and then all the last sheet was my name. I submitted it to our XO who was our assistant football coach and he normally had a pretty good sense of humor, an easy guy— although I mean, within the discipline of the Marine Corps you didn't call them by their first name or get too familiar, but you know there was a relaxed attitude— and I gave it to him and he came in about five minutes later and he looked like he had a fire in his eyes and I was afraid that I'd went too far and he said, "Zwank, stand up, bend over and put your head between your knees and kiss your ass goodbye; you're going to Vietnam." Which was a very exciting thing. It was a good thing and I was really glad that I was finally going to get to do what I entered the Marine Corps to do.

Mark: This desire of yours to get to Vietnam. At a stateside station like Pendleton, was this an uncommon attitude or was it fairly common, widespread?

Zwank: I think everybody that hadn't been to Vietnam wanted to get there, that volunteered. Maybe some of the people that were drafted or given the option of jail or the Marines didn't. Definitely the guys coming back from Vietnam thought we were all crazy.

Mark: Well, see, now that's one of the things I was also interested in – you mentioned the rotation, the only three kinds of Marines were those in, going in, coming back. I'm interested in how word filtered around the Marines themselves about Vietnam and how that impacted upon your impressions of the war before you actually got there.

Zwank: Well, I think the guys that came back – I mean it was very obvious that they didn't want to go back in the worst way, but I think they took a lot of pride in the fact that they had survived it. Some of them had some incredible experiences over there that they'd tell stories so you know the guys that hadn't been there would just sit in awe because of you know just the adventure the excitement and when you're hearing about it— I mean you don't actually think about, you know, the pain if you'd get shot or shrapnel or what it would be like to have your friend die on you or you know a lot of the reality. It's still very abstract. I guess I can relate it to like kids playing video games now where they shoot people all day long on the video screen and there's no reality to it. At that point, there still wasn't any reality to it. It was just the excitement of "I'm going to get to go." I think most of us that hadn't been there, that was the attitude. We wanted to get there. A few of the guys that came back, came back so messed up that they wanted to go back to Vietnam just so they could survive. Their minds were so damaged by the experience that they needed to be there because that was the climate, the moral structure, that they had to be "in" in order to at least have any semblance of normalcy or happiness. There were a few of those, not many. A lot of the guys who came back just wanted to get out and get their time in and get out and move on with their lives.

Mark: So you got your orders, and if you would, describe your voyage to Southeast Asia.

Zwank: Right away I got another leave, I think about a two-week leave and then I came back and then they had another training session that they put everybody through before you go to Vietnam where you get reoriented with grenades and all your rifles and bazookas and tactics and just the basics and then we flew out of El Toro, right outside of Camp Pendleton and it was a commercial plane but the entire flight was the people in our training group, including the officers and the NCOs. Although we didn't stay together or weren't intended to stay together once we got over there, we trained together and flew over together. We stopped in Hawaii for about 15 minutes, just long enough to smell the orchids and the humidity and they basically had people around us so nobody could take off at the airport in case they had second thoughts because I think at this point, most of us were anxious, but I think there were a few people that would have liked to have gotten out of it. Then we flew from there to Okinawa. Okinawa was kind of a fun experience for me because the guy who I talked about earlier that I grew up with that was very close like a brother, he was transferring home from Vietnam and he was in Okinawa. His brother, who I went in on the Buddy Plan with who was a year younger than us, he was stationed in Okinawa in Supply Company and I was in transit over and we had about I think four days where we were all together. We managed to find each other and went out and drank a little beer and got a little rowdy but just kind of had some fun **[End of Tape 1, Side A: User Copy]** and for

my cousin who was coming back, it was just a time of relief because he had extended in fact, to get an extra leave so he did a year and a half there. For me, I was really expecting that you know at this point, I was kind of living like there was no tomorrow because I never really expected or planned you know beyond the day and I learned to kind of accept that because before I enlisted I thought about it – dying at a young age or some of the things that could happen and I didn't look forward to that. You couldn't think about it so the way I dealt with it I just lived for today and had fun today and do as much as you can today and you know tomorrow you deal with that. So we had a good time in Okinawa and I was there about four days and then I flew into Chu Lai and when I landed I was very apprehensive because I was expecting artillery going off and perimeters and VC, you know shooting and all that and we got there and it was kind of like any other place in the world. There were very little signs of war except for all the military people and the uniforms and the vehicles, Vietnam was just an incredibly interesting experience for me. Like I said, I hadn't been out of Wisconsin 'til I joined the Marine Corps so all of a sudden I'm half-way across the world and just to see the way the people lived, the country, the culture, it was just fascinating. I've always enjoyed that part of it. Very few signs of war though, like I said. When I got there I got put in kind of a, I'm not sure what they call it anymore, but I had a group of Vietnamese civilians that I was supposed to supervise and they were mostly older women and they would fill sand bags all day long and build bunkers and my job was just to kind of make sure they worked and did a reasonable number of bags in a day and that the work was acceptable. It gave me a chance to, most of them spoke English or broken English so I had a chance to talk to them and they were very friendly people. I was I guess I was I pretty naïve at that point and assumed they were, related them back to like little old ladies back here in Madison. Hopefully they were. Hopefully they weren't VC or something. I stayed there for about one month and then I got sent up to Chu Lai outside Phu Bai and it was interesting. I got to Vietnam on my birthday, November 9, 1967 and I just turned 19 and one of the first people I met there I had to do guard duty and the NCO of the day was an old crusty guy with a leather face, just like you'd expect to see in the movies and he was a Master Sergeant and I, at the time I feared he was about 100 years old, but he was probably in his forties. But he had enlisted in the Marine Corps when he was 14 years old in World War II and his best friend was killed in a foxhole next to him on his birthday. You start to hear some real interesting people and just meet people who have been on Iwo Jima and things like that you know they were still in the Marine Corps. Going to Chu Lai, actually now I got closer to I guess what I had expected. It was not kind of just a little city with a lot of normal activity and again though, it was pretty quiet. The traces the only signs of war was that you could go out in the morning once the sun was up and leave your base, but you had to be back before sundown because the roads were basically closed and if you happened to get stuck somewhere at another base and wouldn't be able to get back before dusk, you stay there overnight. It

was kind of a strange way, that during the day you could go around unarmed and just about go anywhere you wanted but as soon as it got dark, the land turned over to the NVA and the VC and we stayed inside our perimeters and set up guards and all that.

Mark: This brings us back to the security issue that we left off on. I suppose we could break it into two parts and that would be when you were actually delivering the fuel what sort of security problems were there and did you encounter the enemy and then back at the base. My Uncle was in Vietnam and he says that there really were no front lines but there were no rear areas either, in the sense that they were always, bases were subject to attack by guerillas and that sort of thing. I'm interested in your personal experiences with that sort of thing.

Zwank: Up until the Tet Offensive at the end of January of '68, it was very tame. I mean we knew that there was this stuff going on but we didn't see it or hear it. I didn't see any dead bodies, didn't hear any shooting. We'd hear artillery going over periodically and that was about it. But we knew that – and we had no problems when we'd convoy our fuel out of Hue, in fact, while we were in Hue, it was kind of fun because we'd wander the streets and mingle with the civilians and there was a full-blown economy going in Hue. The ramp where we off-loaded was right across the street from the University of Hue which was about a three, four-story building, a new concrete building. So there was a lot of action. We'd buy Cokes and we could get ice in town so that was a real treat. We had a lot of fun. Then Tet Offensive came and I remember we were building a 100,000 gallon holding tank on a city lot in Hue right on the Perfume River and then running a pipe from Cocoa Island to this tank and the idea was to save all the transport with these Mike boats. They'd had a lot of trouble because they'd finish the pipe line, and then the NVA or the VC at night would take and put holes in the pipes or take a section and open it up again and they had finally been able to pump sea water through the pipe to fill the tank to be sure that it was working and it was a regular city lot about maybe 100 ft wide and 200 feet deep right on the banks of the river and there was a house on each side of us and we would take turns, five of us from our Bulk Fuel Company would go in and work the fuel part of it and then there was a platoon of Infantry that were there for security. I was there the night before the Tet Offensive and the streets were full of people celebrating and drinking and we drank and got pretty drunk, and we had fence around our place but I mean the civilians were all around. It was no big deal. The next afternoon, the Seabees came in every morning and they were building a dock there and they sent a truck in and the Seabees are a pretty laid back group. They normally didn't wear flack jackets or helmets or any of that and they sent this truck in and it had a 50 caliber mounted on a turret over the cab and they had about six guys in their flack jackets and helmets and they came in to pick up their guys and it was very unusual. But I didn't think a lot of it and then the

Colonel of our company said that we had too many people there and that some of us had to go back and most of us wanted to stay because it was a good time, it was a fun time, it was a relief from the military stuff. So I had been in, almost finished my rotation in there and so they told me I was one of 'em that had to go back and I was very disappointed, but so be it. On the way back, I think there were two of us that went back, I noticed the roads were really busy but it was not the kind of thing – just unusual – just a lot of traffic like maybe a holiday, you know the day before a holiday or something. That night the Tet Offensive started and the NVA came in and took over Hue and that was my first experience because we got rocketed that night. We did a lot of beer drinking over there. As often as we could get beer, or somethin' and we'd been drinking that night and all of a sudden about midnight we started hearing these whistling sounds and these explosions and one guy had been in DaNang and a rocket attack and knew what it was. The rest of us in our hooch, probably twenty guys didn't have any idea what it was until he told us. So, at that point, we grabbed our helmets, jackets and rifles and headed out to our trenches. We were always on a perimeter. Fuel and ammunition, they're always on the perimeters in case there is explosions and stuff. We got in our trenches and our bunkers and at that point, that was my first real taste of war and the adrenaline was pumping as fast as it could. That was about as exciting a point in my life as I can remember. I mean I was scared. I was excited. I mean it was all coming together. So that lasted for, seemed like a long time – it was probably an hour before they stopped and then in the morning, we stayed in the trenches because apparently, I didn't have privy to any of the communications but later they realized that all of the bases had been attacked. We had a platoon up at Khe Sanh. Khe Sanh was under enormous pressure and they even told us that the radio transmissions had ended with the sounds of Vietnamese in the radio room and they thought they had been overrun at that point. They had, partially. Also, our communications with our group that was left back at this tank, they were surviving. They had set up defenses and we had barracks set up and fields of fire so that we could defend that position but they were taking a lot of mortar attack and, in fact we had just filled it with fuel. That's what, we had pumped water in, emptied it, and filled it with fuel. So there's 100,000 gallons of fuel in this tank, city lot with about 20 guys defending it. We were in radio communications and the first couple of days they were okay, they had food, but they were running out of ammunition and our Gunnery Sergeant, who was an alcoholic and an old World War II Marine, he came down the third day and asked for volunteers and we were going to try to get in and get 'em out and get 'em some ammunition, [experiences difficulty speaking] but the tanks couldn't even get through so we didn't do that and it was very difficult hearing your friends on the radio not being able to help 'em. About two days later, some of the Navy guys on Cocoa Island that we worked with, they one night got kinda drunked up and they sand bagged a Mike boat and they mounted machine guns on all the corners and they went up the Perfume River in the middle of the night, they dropped the

front gate, provided cover fire for all of those guys to run down the street and get on the Mike boat and they got everyone out alive. [experiences difficulty speaking] It was a very joyful, happy time that all of our friends got out of there. One got shot in the eye and lost an eye, but that was the worst casualty. There were several medals awarded to the Navy guys. Very heroic. That was the beginning of the real war for me and after that it was probably a week to two weeks before we could even get into Hue and when we finally did go back into Hue, the destruction and devastation was incredible compared to what we had remembered. Most of the buildings had been destroyed. There was some very fine, there was one cathedral that I remember— there was a heavy Catholic influence in Hue and it was just—there was a tower left. That's all that was left. We had been told that when the NVA went into the city that a lot of people hid in sewers and that they were trapped there and died. When we went into Hue, the smell of decaying human bodies was so overwhelming it was putrid smell was almost hard to handle it. We used the same ramp to off-load fuel again and most of the bases were getting real low so it was a real high priority thing to get fuel back out to everybody. The University of Hue, the building itself survived but when we got back in there, they were cleaning it out and basically all they were doing was just throwing all the stuff out the window into a courtyard. It was a lot of desks and a lot of bloody clothes and papers and things. We had been told that the NVA went through the classrooms and executed students and I never saw anything in person, but just the blood that was on the stuff they were throwing out in the courtyard when they cleaned out those rooms, I mean and the odors led me to believe that was probably what happened. It was a much different city then. We didn't wander around the streets, there were very few people out and about, there was very little left of Hue on the side we were on. The Citadel was on the other side of the river and they were still fighting in the Citadel when we were back in. They had damaged a main bridge that we used. Initially, they'd back our tank trucks into these Mike boats and the Mike boats would take us across and that was very time consuming and very difficult. We did that for a couple of days and then they repaired an old railroad bridge enough that we could get across it and the security on that bridge was incredible because they had to watch for sappers and the NVA at that point would try to destroy any bridge they could. Some of the other bridges that we crossed previously that were old and deteriorating now were minimally passable. I remember one that went over a fairly high kind of a gorge and they had some planks down at a certain section and the planks were a little wider than a tire is and if the driver missed that and you went off, the truck could have plunged a long ways down so every time we had to go over that, I drove with two guys mainly. You kind of establish a bond with the drivers and you try and match up with the same drivers all the time and I rode with a guy who was kind of a salty Army guy and he even got nervous when we crossed that point, but he was a good driver and I never had any problems. At that point, our trips got a little more exciting. We got ambushed a couple of times, but generally what the strategy

was when we get ambushed is everybody just puts it to the floor and goes as fast as they can. We got stuck in a base camp one night because we couldn't get out in time and we emptied the trucks into the rubber bladders and kept the trucks within the perimeter. In the morning at first light we drove them out and we kind of formed up in a circle like the old wagon trains and while we were waiting to get organized to go back down to Hue, someone out there must have spotted us and they started dropping mortars on us and the only place we could go for cover was underneath these tank trucks and everybody figured because they were empty, they were probably safe, but in fact, we found out later when they're full they're safer than when they are empty because it's the vapors that burn and explode. So there had been cases where a truck that was full had taken rifle fire into it and there hadn't been any problems but the same kind of tracer round going into an empty truck could explode. So we always tried to open the hatch covers on top and air it out as best we could. But, that particular morning we were under the trucks trying to save ourselves, I guess. We just took a handful of mortars and then the officer in charge of the convoy got us going down the road and we just headed back to Hue. A couple of other times we'd take a sniper shot and they'd usually, they'd either shoot at the beginning of the convoy and we'd be at the end and by the time we got to it it had all been over. There was one occasion where we got back to Hue fairly late in the day and we tried to make it back to Phu Bai at dusk and on the road from Hue to Phu Bai there was a railroad track that was on an embankment that was built up from the rice paddies and the NVA or VC, whoever, were on the protected side of it so as we came along, a convoy of about ten trucks they waited for the last three trucks and opened up on 'em. That time, I was at the front of the convoy, I was always very lucky that way, like the time I got out of Hue before the Tet Offensive or the time we got shot at I'd be at the wrong end of it, I guess, but anyway they waited for like the last three and we got back to base and when we were waiting for everybody else to come they didn't come and then the radio let us know that they had been hit and we lost a couple of guys that night. I think that was always the part that was hard on me was not being in the jungle or where we were shooting, is your friends would go out in the morning or go off on a one month duty somewhere and they'd never come back. Some of them would get killed and some would be wounded and be shipped off, but there was never closure. It was always open, you know. It was like saying goodbye to someone in your family in the morning and never seeing them again. That was kind of hard, especially at that age. The bonds were so close that when we got over to Vietnam you formed these bonds with these people too, very quickly and people that you maybe have only known for 6-8 weeks all of a sudden are as close to you as anybody in your life up to that point, so that was the way it was. In the perimeters every night, we served guard duty about every seven or eight days on the perimeter and then you'd have to work your regular duties during the day, so that was always a little tough and periodically, the VC and NVA would try to probe the line. One time the

bunker at the hill below us, they overran it and then they turned the machine guns on the base and used that kind of as an attack point and we had a high point overlooking it and a tank battalion was right next to us and they drove a tank up and they lobbed one round down there and they only counted body parts the next day and tried to separate them into American and Asian. That kind of probing happened fairly regularly after the Tet Offensive, probably into mid to late February, I'm not sure. All of it kind of ran together, I wasn't very conscious of months or days. There were a couple of other occasions where bunkers got overrun. There was a lot of use of marijuana over there.

Mark: I was going to ask about morale and how morale held up during the period you were there. You were there during a very crucial period. Many historians look at that as the turning point in the war. I suppose perhaps we can take that comment and have it lead into a discussion of morale among the troops generally before, during and after the Tet Offensive.

Zwank: I think before it was just putting in your time. During the Tet Offensive it was so exciting and you were so busy that you really didn't have time to think and I mean it was what everybody had been trained for. You're tired all the time, we didn't get sleep like we did before, but everybody was real positive – morale was high. As things slowed down I think that's when morale kind of dropped and I think there were a group of people that you know relied on like marijuana just to get through – period. I knew one guy who reenlisted or extended two times just because of the marijuana, it was very high quality, very inexpensive, you could get 20 rolled cigarettes for about two dollars and so the people that used drugs regularly, it was kind of an ideal place. They could get a job where they didn't have much you know responsibility or expectation and stayed high all day long. It was a real risk for everybody because when those people went out to guard duty, a lot of times they were overrun and then everybody else would be at risk because of them.

Mark: In your observation, did those sorts of drug problems like that get worse as time went on or was it pretty constant throughout your one year or the thirteen months in the case of the Marines?

Zwank: Well, I think I was somewhat isolated from it because in our company there was a group that did it fairly often and there was a lot of us that didn't. For some reason they thought I was a plant, from CID I think they call it. I didn't find that out until I was almost ready to ship out but the guys that I hung out with didn't do it and it was not a problem. They didn't suspect me of being a CID but some of these guys that did, it was ironic because after I came back out of college I was a narc for the State of Wisconsin. So I'm not sure I was all that attuned to it other than the fact that it was readily available and I knew guys that used it regularly. They were very open about it. They really didn't care at that point.

Mark: Alcohol use?

Zwank: A lot. Yeah, we drank a lot. The, Navy, the Seabees could get hard liquor, we could get beer rations and often having fuel, we could trade fuel, especially when the Monsoons came and you needed it to heat the showers, you could almost trade it for anything you want. You could trade it for steaks, we traded it for liquor with the Seabees and then we'd save up our beer rations and we had a club before Tet Offensive and there was a lot of beer. You could go down and drink beer for ten cents a can and most of us you'd drink three or four cans and go home back to our barracks and sleep. But we drank every chance we got and there was a lot of drinking, a lot of drinking.

Mark: More than college? Before or after your military experience?

Zwank: About the same, yeah. I think it was, you know, a lot of drinking.

Mark: Young people will tend to do that – to what extent people were drinking. One of the other morale indicators many people point to in the Vietnam War would be racial tensions. Was that much of a factor where you were?

Zwank: Yeah. We had one black guy that was stabbed in the back by a guy from California. They were both pretty extreme. The guy from California was really prejudiced against blacks and the guy that he stabbed was pretty prejudiced against whites. They just didn't get along and one day one said something to the other and he pulled a small pocketknife and stabbed him in the shoulder. It wasn't fatal or anything. There was some tensions like that. For the most part though, it was isolated to individuals, rather than all blacks or all chicanos or all whites. One of my best friends throughout the Marine Corps was a Mexican guy from Texas, Rudy Conazales and I didn't have a lot of contact with Blacks, they kind of stayed to themselves for the most part. We had a couple of – most of them we got along with real well and there was no – like when you got into the trenches or you're on guard duty there was no tension. It was when you were back drinking beer or in the barracks that the tension, if there was some, appeared. But it was pretty well controlled in our outfit.

Mark: Now, this is a period of mass communications. I suppose compared to the Internet and those sorts of things today it's not what it was now but still you must have had some, there's AFN, sort of contact with the United States and those sorts of things. Did you get a sense of what was going on back in the U.S.? And did that affect the way people viewed their involvement in Vietnam?

Zwank: Well, a little bit. I guess I wrote regularly to my mother and father and a few relatives and friends back here and it was usually family stuff. Very little political stuff. I didn't have a sense of how torn the country had become over here. We didn't have access to television or news. I do remember listening to Lyndon Johnson announce that he was stopping the bombing of North Vietnam in March and it was, it made us very angry because things had just started to get back to normal where we weren't being mortared and rocketed frequently because they were running out of supplies. The bombing had slowed the pipeline. And we knew that bombing was, you know, stopping supplies getting to the salt, even at our level and the peons in the trenches. It wasn't more than a couple of weeks after he stopped the bombing that we started getting rocketed and mortared again so, you know, I think we resented people making decisions so far away, non-military people. At the time I didn't have a good feel for what it was all about but in retrospect they were making political decisions that we in the military and in combat had to live with instead of having military objectives that we could go after and so, you know, now I see the folly of it all. At the time it was just frustrating. We wanted to win. We wanted to finish the war. We knew we could finish the war. We had every bit of confidence in the world that if they would let us, you know, fight the war, that we could end it. There was nobody that had any doubt in their mind that the NVA or the VC could be victorious against our forces.

Mark: Now, see, this brings me to the next issue I was going to bring up, or one of the next issues. Let's just go with it. And that involves the American soldier's image of the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese, the Viet Cong. I mean the various sorts of groups. I don't quite know how to start the question.

Zwank: Yeah, well, I think it varied. I mean there were a lot of people over there that, you know, called them "gooks" and, you know, thought of them as second-class citizens, and stupid, and dirty, and I always had a lot of respect for the Vietnamese people. They were very friendly and we talked a lot of times, my friends and I, how the difference between the NVA and the VC was more political than anything, that if we had a chance to meet in a bar and have a beer together that we'd probably have a lot more in common and have a potential of being a lot closer than a lot of other people in the world, and how ironic it was that we end up trying to kill each other. So, personally, I had a lot of respect for the NVA and the VC and the Vietnamese people. I felt very sorry for the Vietnamese people, the suffering that they were going through. I also, by March, started to realize that this was a civil war, that in fact Ho Chi Minh was very popular. During the Tet Offensive, or the week before the Tet Offensive, when I was in Hue, I had a chance to talk to a lot of people in South Vietnam that held Ho Chi Minh in high esteem -- he was the George Washington of Vietnam -- and started to hear a little more about how this all

happened and that Ho Chi Minh embraced the Russian and Chinese Communist regimes for support because he had been turned down earlier by U.S., I think Eisenhower, and that maybe he wasn't this evil communist that we had been led to believe, and that the people saw him as freeing, uniting their countries. So then you start wondering, you know, what's this all about. I was too young and not aware, I didn't have enough information to pursue it but it started to surface at that point.

Mark: And the issue of communism, was that something that you thought about? And did you think of it as a war against communism? Or you're just a young man in the Marines doing what he was told? I mean, I'm interested in the mind-set.

Zwank: Yeah, I mentioned earlier when I first went over, the influence of like my Catholic education, I really did feel like that I wanted to help liberate the Vietnamese people from communism. It was very idealistic and very naïve and very youthful. But I really did see that as an important objective and it was a factor and I wanted to see them have the potential in the plenty that we had back here, all the advantages that I had growing up. My understanding of communism at that point was that it was repressive and restrictive and just seeing the way the people were I didn't realize a lot of that was the result of domination by the French and things like that. I've learned a lot since about what had gone on and I think today if I were asked to do it over again, the experiences themselves, I really wouldn't want to trade or give up, but I don't think I could commit myself to a cause like that again and that's why as a father of three sons ranging in age from, the youngest is almost 16 and my oldest is 21, I would not want to sacrifice any one of those boys or anybody else's son for any cause similar to that. I see Bosnia as an example of that. And I've been very vocal in protesting a lot of these actions every since Panama, Dominican, or that ...

Mark: Haiti.

Zwank: Haiti, the little island before that, that Reagan went into...

Mark: Grenada?

Zwank: Grenada, yeah. And this last time, now that I got e-mail it's so easy. I sent e-mail to Clinton and I said if you believe in it, send your daughter not my sons. I didn't get any response obviously. I just don't see that we have a role anymore in going into these civil wars and trying to resolve them. Vietnam would have been much better off had we stayed out of it, let Ho Chi Minh consolidate the country, and in time I believe communism would have died, democracy would have flourished, free economy would have, the people of Vietnam are very creative, very energetic, hard working people. They would

have in time freed themselves from the communists in a less costly, violent way. So---

Mark: They say it's happening now anyway.

Zwank: Yeah.

Mark: This is kind off the point but it's something else I wanted to cover, and that involves the relationship between a rear echelon Marine such as yourself and the front-line infantry grunt. Sometimes the names for the rear echelon guys and I don't want to repeat it, but I'm interested in that relationship. Is it as tense as some people make it out to be? How much of it is just ribbing? And how much of it is really serious?

Zwank: I think a lot of it was ribbing. I mean, at the time you're so separated that they keep the grunts kind of in a little compound separate, and I think because they come back very violent, probably there's a reason for it. There's a lot of ribbing that takes place but, you know, before, during and since the guys that were in the infantry when you sit down and talk about your experience, you don't see a distinction or differentiation or any hostility. It's like, you know, a brotherhood that you survived it. And so I didn't see that and maybe someone in the infantry would not share that but I didn't see it from my side. Another thing is the difference was, you know, like maybe a heartbeat. I mean you could one day be at Bulk Fuel and the next day you'd be out in the trenches with the infantry and I, there is an example of that. When I volunteered to go to Vietnam, all my friends kind of, you know, teased me and laughed about it, you know, because, you know, realizing that if I survive about another month without being picked I wouldn't go, I'd just spend my time and get out. I was in, it was after the Tet Offensive and I was driving over a little bridge in the convoy heading into Hue and I looked and there was a, they had, call them "KAC" (sp??) units. They were small groups of about 10 guys that would be put on like bridges or work to secure villages at night and they're basically out there on their own and during the day it was no problem at all, they just mingled with civilians, but at night it was a real tense place to be. It was probably of all the things to do in Vietnam, one of the least appealing. So anyway, I was driving into Hue and I looked down the bridge and there was three guys that were in my barracks back in Pendleton sitting on this bunker in their helmets and flack jackets and stuff and it just shocked me and I jumped out of the truck, and I was going to hitchhike in later, and I talked to them 'cause, you know, these were people I was very close to and they told me like a month after, like right after Tet they came into the barracks, in the middle of the night, and they just picked out everybody that hadn't been to Vietnam, wasn't a sole surviving son, etc., that was eligible to go, and that night, without any preparation or anything, they packed their duffel bags, they drove them down to San Diego, put them on a boat, on the boat ride to Vietnam they

trained them for infantry, they got to DaNang, in DaNang they did a search and destroy sweep as grunts, and that was their on-the-job training, and they took some pretty heavy casualties and a couple of the people that I knew from the States got killed in that period, and then they put them out in these "KAC" units. So it was kind of, it was another irony that had I maybe not gone, I probably would have ended up maybe being in a worse situation than I was. So there, quite a few of the guys that were in bulk fuel ended up in this very risky grunt function of guarding bridges and villages. A lot of times at night they'd take more fire from inside the perimeter than outside the perimeter so once the sun went down they get in their bunkers and they just protect themselves from both directions and just try and survive 'til morning. So it was an interesting experience. A couple of other things that stick in my mind and I'd just like to mention, I think going into Hue after the Tet Offensive when they first, it took the Marines a long time to secure enough of Hue to open the road, and before that I really hadn't seen much evidence of the war, the wars and attacks, but started seeing dead bodies on the road and they pull them out just like we see deer now **[End of Tape 1, Side B: User Copy]** and you notice little dark purple spots on their bodies. There was another thing that they did. They would cut penises off of the NVA and VC and stick them in their mouth because, to the Vietnamese culture, that was something that followed them into their afterlife. It was meant to intimidate them. And so you'd start to see, I remember one morning there was a big roll of unstretched concertina and there was a Vietnamese, a dead Vietnamese guy with his arms tied to the, kind of like a crucifix, and his shorts and his crotch was just covered with blood. And that was the first time I had seen that and so after that you start seeing dead bodies all the time on the road like that but it was just kind of like seeing deer now, you know. They just, sometimes they lay there awhile and start to bloat and get black. That was kind of different. Another thing I remember that in thinking about this, why is it stuck in my mind is one time we were driving into Hue and there was a stand of trees about maybe 500 yards to the side of the road and a jet came flying over as we're driving down and dropped napalm on that and the napalm just exploded and drove right down the length of the woods there. One of the things that was kind of fascinating was just watching some of the air assaults. We used to watch the jets come in and provide ground support at different points and these jets, the F-14s, would come out of the sky, out of nowhere, straight down, they'd drop their bombs and they'd pull straight up, make a real steep "v" and it was fascinating to watch. And then sometimes after they did, like we'd watch them on the perimeters, and after they'd do that-- a lot of times I think they were doing it to knock out what looked like maybe NVAs getting ready to get into position for a night probe or something, but then they come flying over the base and do their victory roll, real low, you know, close to the ground. That was always kind of fun to watch. The other thing that we used to do is at night we'd, after the Tet Offensive when there was a lot of action on the perimeters at night, we'd go out and sit in the bunkers and you watched the

gun ships come in and provide cover for different points of the perimeter getting attacked or probed, and it was kind of like the 4th of July, you know, all the time. And these helicopters could really put down some fire and one time we had a, right after the Tet Offensive, a night or two after it started, at Chu Lai our perimeter was getting probed pretty hard and, you know, we had one of these C-130s — they called them “Puff the Magic Dragon” I think — they come in with these M-60s that shoot like machine guns and started just dropping their stuff. It was just an incredible thing to see that, much coming out of one plane. But that was another interesting thing. One other thing, when we go out to Cocoa Island it always amazed me there was these remnants of these beautiful French villas sitting out in the middle of these big sandy areas that were just barren and it always kind of, I always wondered why would they have ever built these houses out, big palaces, out in the middle of the sand with nothing. It wasn't until I got back and learned about Agent Orange that I'm sure they were defoliated and they cleared those areas because they needed clear fields of fire to protect where they loaded supplies, food and water. And also our wells for our drinking water were out there which, you know, at the time didn't, I mean I didn't think anything of it. It wasn't again until I thought of Agent Orange that I realized, you know, what a silly place to put the wells for our drinking water where they'd defoliated. And at the time I don't know if they knew what they were doing with that or not but at the time I just thought what a silly place to build such fancy houses. Why would they put them in the middle of sand like that. Now I think I know the answer and it's kind of ironic. The other thing I guess, to wrap it up, to bring it to a conclusion is I, basically after March it got kind of into a routine, where you know, it was a lot safer. Our convoys would get snipers once in awhile but nothing real serious. Every, maybe once a week we'd get a couple rockets or mortars and we were getting so old and crusty I remember one night we slept through a mortar attack. We'd been drinking beer and didn't even know about it 'till the next morning. A mortar had dropped outside the wall where I slept, you know, very close and got buried in the sand, didn't explode. But you started getting a little more crusty and hardened toward it. But I rotated back to the States in late August and I spent a couple of days in transit in Okinawa. I got back to Camp, to El Toro, we flew into San Francisco and I remember when we touched down, [experiences difficulty speaking] that was one of the happiest times of my life, when I knew I was back in the United States. And then we flew down to El Toro from San Francisco and we got in like on a Thursday night and they couldn't process us out Friday and Monday was Labor Day, so we had to stay an extra day and we had nothing. They lost all my stuff in transit so I had to kind of, I had the clothes that I was wearing and that was it and I needed a uniform to get discharged and they had a big bin of stuff that guys discarded and I had like a hat that was ten sizes too small and a shirt that I could barely get around my chest but it was a uniform and it met the day. And I remember that day waiting for that day to be over, you know, knowing that the next day you're getting out and the only reason you

couldn't be out that day and heading home was 'cause it was, you know, a holiday and it drove me crazy. But I got home and ...

Mark: So there was no thought of re-enlisting.

Zwank: No. By that time, in fact I had had an experience, I was basically at a point where I would have given up my, citizen --- well, I don't know, but I, one day in August we were drinking beer and, it's kind of a funny story, we used to, for a urinal, you take a piece of hose, rubber hose, and bury it in the ground about three feet and call it a "pisser" and it had a piece of screen over it and you'd, you know, it was about maybe eight inches in diameter and you'd pee in it, and most of us would just get up and go, hang it out the door and, you know, pee out the door, especially at night, but we were out peeing in the bushes and the gunnery sergeant who was half drunk, too, came up and asked, there was like three of us, if we didn't know where the urinal was and we were kind of joking and, you know, getting ready to rotate home, you kind of salty I guess they call us, and I kind of said, "Yeah, Gunny, I'll go look for it as soon as I get done here," you know, and he didn't see the humor in that, so he told me to go back in and sleep it off 'cause him and I got arguing and I told him he could take his Marine Corps and stick it up his ass and we really got going and I told him, you know, I'd give up my citizenship before I'd, you know, put in another fucking year in that place and I was really venting. I had a lot of frustration and getting close to going home. So, I don't even remember how we got going on that but anyway I, at that point, I would not have re-enlisted. If I would have been extended, in fact I used to have dreams like nightmares that I'd been re-activated and I kept thinking "I already did this, I shouldn't be here," you know. "I need to tell someone; they made a mistake," you know. It's something that is hard to reconcile. The fact that it was so hard and so painful in a lot of ways but the memories, most of the memories at this point are good memories and the fact that you survived, the confidence that it generated for me for the rest of my life could have never, I could have never gotten it I don't think had I not done it. The skill, the self-discipline, a lot of the things that I look back on my life now, I'm 48, that have helped me to be successful were as a result of my training and my experiences, the appreciation for the simple things in life. I think empathy for under-privileged and third world countries, I think a whole lot of it I can relate to now because of that experience.

Mark: So you were discharged and I suppose it was too late to get back into school for the fall semester.

Zwank: No, I had registered already.

Mark: You had registered.

Zwank: Yeah, and I took a correspondence course when I was in Vietnam. The other thing I, while I'm doing all this, I want to get out of college as fast as I can so the summer that I enlisted, after I enlisted I took a five credit 3rd semester calculus course so when I went in the Marine Corps I had about 40 college credits and so I wanted to get another 5 while I was in so I could pick up a semester, so I registered while I was in Vietnam, so I ...

Mark: At the UW here?

Zwank: At the UW here, came back in and I was sitting in class, I forget the days now, it was less than 10 days after I left Vietnam, and that was an incredible mistake. At the time it seemed like the right thing to do, but the transition, especially, I mean, the protests were going on daily then, and now all of a sudden I realize what is going on back here and to sit in a class, now I'm a couple of years older than my peers or the kids I'm in class with and they, you know, say "What are you? A senior?" and I say, "No, I'm a sophomore." Well, you know, you start, this gap in your life. At first I'd talk about it and then it became real obvious that not only didn't they support it, they resented you for doing it and you became the target of their rage and protest so it didn't take more than a couple of weeks and I realized that this thing I accomplished that I had this pride in was something to be ashamed of by their standards and that I had to hide.

Mark: Now, were there many other vets on campus?

Zwank: Yeah.

Mark: Were you aware of them?

Zwank: Yeah, because, actually my, the period I was in and out there were a whole bunch, probably 10, 15 guys that I grew up with and graduated, or were close to in high school, and we all kind of were getting out about the same time, so they were either back a couple of months or were getting back and as a consequence we kind of clustered and we used to hang out at the bars, and Badger Tavern was a big hang-out for us, and we started to just kind of rely on each other for that social grouping that you needed.

Mark: You were all students or it was just ...

Zwank: Most of us were, yeah, again. I think that's the one thing, when I left to go in the service I wasn't motivated to go to school. When I came back I was very motivated to go to school 'cause I saw the difference in what your life has to offer after you graduated as opposed to if you don't. So it was very difficult for me to re-enter the campus community. I was fortunate, I met my wife a couple of months after I got back and she helped me to get back into a normal

kind of life and to reintegrate but I was always had to, unless I ran into another veteran I couldn't feel comfortable, and the first couple of months back on campus I hear a loud noise and, you know, jump to go find a bunker. You just, everything, you were on edge all the time and you just couldn't adjust to the fact that nobody's going to try and, you know, shoot at us here and nobody's going to mortar us, nobody's going to rocket us, that you know, that we're secure. It took me a couple of years to really feel comfortable with that again.

Mark: It was tough but you stuck it out apparently.

Zwank: Yeah.

Mark: Did you graduate?

Zwank: Yeah, I graduated. And then, my biggest trouble after that was that there was an adrenaline high to all of this and coming back to civilian life, the downer of it, I mean, was a big down, and it started to be a problem for me so when I graduated I got a job working in law enforcement as a narcotics agent ...

Mark: For the city or for the state, you said?

Zwank: For the state, yeah, for the Division of Criminal Investigation. And so that kind of got me back into the adrenaline highs again which-- it's something-- I didn't know what was happening at the time, but I realized later when I got back into law enforcement that it was the adrenaline high, and it's probably one of the most incredible addicting highs that you can ever experience. Even though you're scared and you wish you were a lot of other places, when you go through that, life doesn't, I mean, life doesn't get any more intense or the experience, you never have an experience like that again. It's like, you know, maybe if you've ever had a close call in an accident or something where you kind of, you're heart's pumping and racing and you're just moving on instinct for a period of time. Well, you can imagine like when you start getting attacked at night, you know, like maybe 10:00 o'clock at night and you're out there for five or six hours and it's just pumping adrenaline. That part of it is hard to walk away from.

Mark: Did you stay in law enforcement long?

Zwank: Yeah, I was in it for thirteen years and then I went into training for five more years. In that process I got involved with computers and now I'm out of law enforcement. I've been out of law enforcement about seven years. I manage computers for a federal agency.

Mark: Um, two things I want to cover in about the 10, 15 minutes we have.

Zwank: Okay.

Mark: First involves some sort of veteran's benefits that may have been available to you at the time and your knowledge of them and did you use any of them? For example, you had access to some sort of GI Bill after Vietnam.

Zwank: Right.

Mark: Did you use that or were you able to finance your education on your own?

Zwank: Yeah, no, I took advantage, and I knew that coming out. It was, I think, \$285 a month but tuition was only about \$150 a semester or something.

Mark: For a state resident.

Zwank: Yeah, for a state resident. And so it was a lot of money. I was able to survive on it. I had a little part-time job and I was able to have a car and rent an apartment and stuff. Did all right. I got married about a year after I got back and my wife worked at Madison General Hospital. And so between what she made, my GI Bill, and then I drove school bus for Badger Bus, we lived good, we saved money, we ate steak and saved money, we had two cars. I mean, it was a great time and we had a lot of fun and I got serious about school again and my grade point, I started getting like 3.3s and 3.5s as opposed to when I left I think I had a 2.7 or something. It was a great experience. And then after I started working I worked for a couple of years and a friend of mine that I'd been in the Marine Corps with was a Madison cop, he had gone back to school part-time, or he'd been back to school full-time, I don't remember, but he got a masters degree in public administration and he kept talking me into it so I got into the program and while I was working full-time I went part-time and by taking six credits in graduate school, it was equivalent to $\frac{3}{4}$ time so it was like having a part-time job and because I didn't use all of my benefits to get my bachelors degree because I had already had about a semester or a year-and-a-half of school, I had enough to get started and the rule was if your benefits run out before you complete your degree objective, they will continue for you. So for the whole time I was going to graduate school I was taking two courses, basically, a semester and getting $\frac{3}{4}$ benefits which was like having this great part-time job and I enjoyed it because it was kind of a recreational outlet or a hobby almost. I go work and do it during the day and then go to school, you know, study what I'd been doing all day so I could relate it and so that was fun.

Mark: So that worked out well for you.

Zwank: Yeah.

Mark: When you got your state job, I'm not sure what the veteran's preference laws were at the time, but to your knowledge did that help you get that job at all?

Zwank: Um, I think it helped. I think it also helped when I made a transition into the federal service, the five points. Although I think when I made the transition to federal service, my masters degree helped me most of all and my experience. They were looking for a strange combination that I had. But, yeah, it helped me get my state, and at the time there was a lot of criticism about this five point, ten point thing and veteran's preferences and a lot of the guys that I knew, friends that weren't veterans, you know, they start getting kind of critical. It was kind of a touchy thing, you know. They didn't want to really express themselves because they knew they weren't eligible and stuff and at the time I felt a little uncomfortable getting the benefits, the five points, but now I think the people that go to combat zones in the military, they should get maybe not only ten points, they should go to the front of any line, you know, that they're qualified for. I wouldn't, you know, endorse hiring people that aren't qualified but I feel, and the older I get the stronger I feel about it, it's that the guys that were there that did the bidding of their country, they got first claim and anybody that disagrees with that, before I'd just kind of be a little more tolerant, now I don't. I think, especially at the time, we were all young and I feared everybody had a good shot at being, you know, successful in life. And since then I've seen all the veterans, especially from my era, that are wandering the streets that are alcoholics or broken down, whose lives just went to pot. They may have anyway but the war sure didn't help those people. There are a lot of people that were marginal, probably, in terms of being successful or productive adults but the war put them over the edge. I look at myself. I've been very fortunate. I've had a lot of luck and a lot of timing and I guess I'm one of the people that the statistics would show has readjusted but I can say every day of my life I think about Vietnam. It's something that never leaves you and I left a lot of friends there. One of the guys I went in the buddy plan with, he was an MIA, he still is an MIA although I'm sure he's dead. And I guess there's a part of me that, you know, was left behind there, too, and I didn't realize it at the time. I have a very, very strong desire to go back to Vietnam. It was a wonderful, beautiful country that I think I would like to try to live in for awhile. I don't know if I'll ever get a chance but I think I will always have this empty spot in my soul until I get back there. I may die with that empty spot but ...

Mark: A lot of guys are going now.

Zwank: Yeah. And it's ...

Mark: Relatively young. Don't give up.

Zwank: Yeah. I have a friend who was in the Air Force and he just went back last year and he said it was a great experience.

Mark: I've just got one last area of questioning and this may or may not even apply to you, and that involves veteran's organizations and reunions and that sort of thing. Did you ever join any organizations? Either any of the big ones or any of the smaller unit-type, or that sort of thing?

Zwank: No, in fact, my Marine Corps experience taught me the rest of my life not to join anything. And I have been kind of a non-joiner. I have not belonged to any clubs or organizations. When we first came back there was a Veterans of Foreign Wars group that was meeting and a couple of us went to one of their meetings they called and were very encouraging. And we got there and it was so much hate and, you know, going and breaking the protestor's heads and, I mean, we had all just come back from all the violence and hate that we ever wanted to see. So I went to that one meeting after that. I have never gone back and I have no interest in any of those groups. I've not attended any meetings. I, no support groups, no nothing. Maybe at one point some of that would have been healing, but at this point I don't want anything. In fact, just coming up to do this was, not so much a difficult thing, as I guess I just reconciled to keeping this as a very personal thing and I guess the reason I did it is because of Dr. McIntosh and he won't let up until I do it. But, also, I think there was a purpose served and people expressing their experiences and feelings with the hope that history doesn't repeat itself, but it does — over and over and over. And I think that's been one of the biggest disappointments in my life is that how quickly we've forgotten Vietnam. It may not be Bosnia but we will be back in another Vietnam because the politicians continue to want to use military solutions for political problems and American interests and there is very little that I can see as legitimate needs for armed conflict scale of a war. I think the one thing it does, Vietnam probably protected our cities for awhile from a lot of youthful energy and a lot of the kids that went there burned themselves out in terms of violence and their aggressiveness and things, that war is good for keeping kids off the street and that sort of thing, but I don't think it accomplishes anything else.

Mark: I suppose that's an apropos place to end.

Zwank: Yeah, I guess so.

Mark: Thanks for coming in.

Zwank: Yeah. I hope maybe 200 years from now someone has a chance to listen to all of this.

[End of Interview]