

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH BRYANT MITCHELL

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

FANTASTIC TRANSCRIPTS

Shaun Illingworth: This begins the second interview session with Bryant Mitchell on March 24, 2016 in Alexandria, Virginia with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having me here again. To begin, we left off last time talking about your entry into the service during the Vietnam War. You had been playing football in Canada when you received your draft notice. You decided to come back and obey the draft board.

Bryant Mitchell: Right.

SI: Tell me about the experience of entering the military. What was it like to leave your family and your community?

BM: Well, as you can imagine it wasn't a surprising thing because, as you know, at that time everyone had had a lottery number once you became eighteen years old and registered for the draft, which all eighteen-year-olds had had to do. Male eighteen-year-olds. I had drawn the lottery number forty-two. So, I knew that I had gone through Rutgers with a student deferment because the Vietnam War was taking place during that whole time. So when I was in Canada and I did get the notice that I had been called to be drafted. I discussed it with my father, who I mentioned before was an Episcopalian priest. He said that, "If you're interested in staying in Canada, I can loan you money until the season starts and you could [stay there]. It depends on what your conscience says, whether you wanted to defect or not," and I told him that I would not want to defect. It wasn't because--I disagreed with what my country was doing in terms of going to the war or not--it was because I realized the privileged life that I had lived, in that my friends that I grew up with back in Virginia and all who did not have all the privileges I had were being drafted and sent to the war. That I never would've been able to live with my conscience and my privilege in having a choice to defect or whatever. I wouldn't do that. I said, "If my friends had to go fight, then, I should have to go also." So, I did. I kind of expected it but I never really thought it would happen, but it was very--what would I [say]? It was an enlightening experience, but it also gave me a chance to see who my age peers were in the entire United States. I was inducted in Roanoke, Virginia at the induction center and it's this huge place. There are these buses [that] would be coming in with nothing but draftees in their civilian clothes, and then all of a sudden you'd go into this huge warehouse and you would see lines and lines of people. What

they did is, they would register you. They'd take your personal information, your Social Security number and all of this stuff, and then they'd put you up in this hotel, the Hotel Roanoke. They'd put you up in this hotel overnight and then they'd call you the next morning. You'd go back to this huge building and they'd tell you where you were going for basic training. While I was there, while they were testing me and everything, I tried to get out on a mental deferment, tried to act like I was an unstable person and all. [laughter] They sent me to this psychiatrist and I was talking with him. He said, "Mr. Mitchell, you do have some really weird thoughts on certain things," he said, "but the mere fact that you have those defined thoughts on those things means that you're mentally capable to serve in the United States Army." Oh, prior to that, once this Marine recruiter, or whatever he was, at the induction center he saw my record and everything. Having finished Rutgers and football and all of that stuff, he said, "I would like you to be my Marine lieutenant draftee for the day." See what folks, I don't think many people understand [is] that other branches of the service, if they saw someone that they thought had a profile that was suitable for them, they would try to draft [them]. They'd take you into their service but I had acted like I wanted a mental deferment and stuff so they sent me to the psychiatrist that day. So, I missed the bus that was going to the basic training thing. So, when I got back to the center there, they said, "Mr. Mitchell, you're one unlucky guy." I said, "Why is that?" They said, "Because you were going to be my Marine lieutenant draftee for the day and I had to pick someone else," and I'm saying to myself, "Thank God." [laughter] I mean, everyone knew that the Marines were there purely on the DMZ Line and were really just cannon fodder. If you're going to be in the war, it would be intensified at least twofold if you were with the Marines up on the DMZ, the Demilitarized Zone. So I missed that, but then the next bus, they put me on and I ended up in Fort Jackson, South Carolina, which was one of the biggest Army basic training camps in the country. Once I was there I had this great, big, beautiful afro, right, and they had us all lined up for barbers' chairs. There were probably about thirty to fifty barbers' chairs in this warehouse at the front and lines behind each chair. They would buzz your head. I mean, they would just shave all your hair off. Well when this one black barber, which was the barber in the line I was in, when he saw me, probably fifty people back at the rear of the line, he said, "Oh, no." And he asked one of his assistants, he said, "Would y'all go back there and get that black militant with the great, big, beautiful afro and bring him up here now?" That's what they did, man. These guys went back, got me by the arm, took me all the way up to the front, [and] put

me in the chair. And this guy just loved demeaning me, man, shaving my head. At that particular moment, I knew I was in the Army. [laughter] I mean I was just a number, which like I said, with a fairly privileged life up to that point. [It] really let me know that I'm just like everybody else. So then we were assigned to different barracks at Fort Jackson and thank God I had a staff sergeant, a drill sergeant named Sergeant Askins. I think he was Hispanic, because he talked like English was a second language, an accent, Hispanic-like accent. But he had done four tours in Vietnam. He had this bayonet scar on his arm where he had been in hand-to-hand combat, man, in Vietnam. So like I told you, once they shaved my head and once they gave me this uniform, these fatigues and all, I knew it's time for me to change gears. Forget college, forget everybody--you have to survive now. You've got to survive this thing and only you. Your parents, your friends, girlfriends--nothing means anything anymore. Even your religion probably doesn't mean anything anymore. So I went into--and to this day I'll tell Madeleine, if something's really pressuring me and all, I'll just say, "Madeleine, I just have to go into my Vietnam mode now, because, then, I can handle it." By that I mean, "Just worry about you, Bryant, and how you're going to survive this thing." Sergeant Askins, when I found out he had done four tours in combat in Vietnam I said, "I'm going to hang on every single word he says, because, if he made four tours, he can help me survive." Sergeant Askins even told me because they gave me an opportunity at the induction center, instead of being a two-year draftee, if I enlisted for an extra year they'd send me to officers' training school, Officer Candidate School, OCS. And I told them, "No, I just want the shortest [time]. Two years is enough for me," because I knew, even if I didn't make it in football, that I was going to go to graduate school for something. I was an art history major at Rutgers. I knew I wasn't going to get but certain types of employment with that. So I knew I intended on going to graduate school after this period anyway. So Sergeant Askins, though he looked at my record and everything and he said, "I want you to be my platoon leader." He says, "You have all the leadership skills. You've got four years of college, you're a football player and stuff. So, you've got the physical and mental attributes to be my platoon leader," and so I told him, I said, "Okay, good." Oh, this is another part I missed in the induction center, everybody--no, this wasn't in the induction. This was at basic training. In our barracks we had a guy from New York City, Puerto Rican, who was a heroin addict and had made it this far, just a few days. However, his first night in the barracks he started having withdrawal symptoms and the poor kid was screaming and yelling and all of that. He was trying to go through withdrawal

so [that] he could kick his habit, and he thought that being in basic training and being in the Army would be a good place for him to do it. Well it just got worse and worse. So the next day, man, Sergeant Askins said, "We have to send him home, Bryant," and I really had mixed feelings about it because this kid, here he was, trying to get away and improve his situation and kick his habit, at no expense to his family or anything financially, and he couldn't make it. Then, also I had another guy who clearly, he was--I wouldn't say he's gay or anything, but he was a very effeminate-type kid and was not the smartest kid around. He was from a rural area somewhere. I talked with Sergeant Askins about him and all and he said, "Well, Mitchell, what do you think? Should he be in this man's Army?" and I told him, I said, "Does that mean, are you asking me, would I trust going into combat with him?" He says, "That's it," and I said, "No, I don't think he'd make it." I just said, "I think he's too weak to be a good combat soldier and all and to live in this type of system, when you've got bullies and everybody else." So, Sergeant Askins sent him home, man, under my advice. Oh, also second lieutenants only had to spend six months of combat. Once they went to Vietnam they only had to be in the field for six months. Sergeant Askins, my sergeant who had done four tours, told me, he said, "Mitchell, don't ever, if you can help it, take a second lieutenant's word in combat as the last word because," he said, "he doesn't have the experience." That's why I learned once I got to Vietnam a lot of second lieutenants had a lot of deaths from friendly-fire. Because when the troops, when the grunts, infantry guys, knew that this guy was a second lieutenant and just new in the field, they wouldn't listen to what he said. If he ever gave some commands that were not conducive to surviving a firefight, they'd kill him. They'd kill him. I mean, it was more common than people back here would realize but Sergeant Askins, like I told you, I hung on every word he told me and, thank God. Once I--oh, and he also said that, "The General, the brigade general, has a touch football team and they want you to be on it." [laughter] So, because of my being the platoon leader and being on the General's football team, I never ever did one bivouac and I always bargained my way out of KP. [I] never did KP in basic training. So, how I did that was that I had these two black Muslims in my platoon. They were from Chicago. These guys were pure street boys and they were real hard to--not discipline, but not to command either. However, they weren't nice people and they were very selfish guys in terms of teamwork with the platoon. So, they wanted to sneak in to see prostitutes at night from base camp, from the basic training camp at night. So, I told them, I said, "Well, I'll let you do it if you do all my KP," and I said, "and if you make reveille every morning

and be spit-and-polished like the rest of us. I'll turn away from it. I won't turn [you in] but," I said, "if you get caught I don't know you. I didn't know what you were doing," and it worked out perfectly. They did all my KP but the one guy, Johnson, the taller of the two. He was about six-two, a thin guy, he was a real arrogant son of a bitch. In the mess hall, you only had ten minutes to get in and eat and out. Johnson one time talked back to one of our drill sergeants, who was this big black dude. I mean, he could've been a tackle in the NFL, man. Johnson said something smart to him, man, and this guy. He knew that this guy's attitude was bad anyway, right. But right there in the mess hall, this guy, this drill sergeant, man, kicked Johnson's ass. I mean literally mopped the floor with him. That broke this guy's spirit, man, I mean, but everybody else in the platoon is going, "Thank God. Now, he'll understand that he is on the same level that the rest of us are." So, I'm seeing all of this stuff and that's why, in a way, it helped me as a person a lot. To find out, here I am with these draftees, not with officers in Officer Candidate School and that kind of stuff, but with the regular draftees of this country who are going to be sent [to Vietnam]. At the time I went into the Army, ninety-nine, 98.5 percent of all the guys in basic training were going to eventually go to Vietnam. So after basic training it's called AIT, advanced infantry training. I was assigned to Military Police School in Fort Gordon, Georgia and these are all guys who tested out, above average intelligence and all, and would be military policeman. Now, then I thought maybe I'd get stationed either in Europe or somewhere in the United States--no way, not as a two-year draftee and all. So I was a 91B, which was a combat MP, man, and I was attached. From basic training I was sent to--oh, I've got to tell you another thing. In Fort Gordon, Georgia, in military police training, that's where all of us were trained. All the military policemen were [trained] at Fort Gordon. It's funny, because "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" wasn't even thought about in that day. I remember one time we were at reveille, at formation and all, and there was this one guy who was like a specialist four who worked in one of the platoon offices as a clerk. It was so funny because here we are at attention and everything, and when this guy walks by, behind our drill sergeants, one of the drill sergeants says, "Uh-oh, here comes one of my favorite troops." Then this guy, who was black, [and] obviously gay, he says, "Oh, yes, now you know why I love this man's Army--all these good, handsome, healthy troops." [laughter] I thought I was going to bust out laughing, but what was so funny about it is that gays have thrived in the Army all this time and here it was. I hadn't made a big stink of it and everything until this issue came up with whether they should serve in combat and all this

kind of stuff. Anyway, this is just another one of my experiences in being with regular people. So then, at the end of AIT training, we're standing in formations to get our assignments.

SI: Let me just clarify something.

BM: Okay.

SI: Your advanced infantry training was the combat military police training.

BM: Yes, yes, and they called it AIT training. I could've gone to Signal School or something else but that's just what they called it, okay, go on.

SI: Roughly how long were those two training sessions?

BM: They were each eight weeks each, yes. It's pretty fast-moving stuff. Oh, another thing I learned in basic training is that your locker, you'd have a footlocker, everything you had was in there. You were issued a certain number of undershirts, a certain number of underpants, socks, fatigues, towels, and they'd all have to [fit in there]. The towels would be rolled into little cylinders like that, about that big around, in your lockers and stuff. Your bed had to be--they were bunkbeds, all little springs underneath--your beds had to be so tight that a quarter would have to bounce four inches. Every morning they would come through and check. I said, "I'll be damned if I'm going to do this every day." [laughter] So what I did once I made my bed, I would take my fatigues off and lay that profile down on my bed and I would sleep on top of it with my underwear on, like this. Remember, there's a latticework of springs under these beds. There's no comfortable stuff like any of this, right. To make it tight, you'd pull it underneath and all and I found out, if I slept on top of it like that, that's all I had to do in the morning for my bed. I didn't have to remake it at all. You're only allowed to have a duffel bag, I mean, a dirty clothes bag, and you'd have it tied a special way at the head of your bunk. I figured out, I said, "Yes, what I'll do is that I'll keep a towel [in my dirty clothes] and stuff like that," in other words, I never opened my trunk. Once I had it perfect, everything in the right place, razor [and] all that stuff in the right place I didn't want to do that again either. So, I had little extra stuff that I'd get at the

PX, my shaving cream and all that. I'd keep it in my dirty clothes little duffel bag at the end of my [bunk]. So, I never had to open [my footlocker], [laughter] because you'd have inspections every morning. Each platoon was in a separate [floor of a two-story] building (barracks), a little building. If you won the [barracks] inspections [for cleanliness and polish], you'd get a three-day pass. So, I talked my guys into [it]--our floor was so spic-and-span, Shaun, you could see your face in it, man. And it was like a Kelly green linoleum. We kept that thing so shiny, I mean, we would wax it, we would smooth it over with a towel, clean towel, all the time. We'd wax it once a week. We decided we'd take our shoes off before we went in our [floor], man, so [that] we wouldn't have to work so hard. So, in that eight weeks, I got two weekends or two three-day passes for my guys. It was my first effort at management and I found out that if you got your guys behind you and you did some things where they could get rewarded, it worked. Anyway, while we're in formation to get our assignments after MP School, advanced infantry training school, they go down the roster and they go down alphabetically. Then, when they got to, "Mitchell--RVN," when you heard that, see, here I am. Pretty much at the bottom half of the alphabet and everybody, I mean it was the 98.5 percent, everybody's name was called. Everybody had after it "RVN," the Republic of Vietnam. The only good thing about that is that I had expected it. [laughter] So, after that, you were allowed to go home. I don't even know how long I was able to go home. It wasn't a month, I don't think, but it was a pretty sad time and my parents--it was a time of mixed feelings. You were glad because this may be the last time you'd see your loved ones and vice versa, but number two is that you're healthy now and you're not there yet. You're not in the war yet. So, my day came for debarkation. My parents drove me up to--my flight was leaving from Dulles Airport--and my parents brought me up. My mom was real sad, of course. And I think my girlfriend, Edwina, was there, and my dad. My mom says she remembered it because, once they called us to board the plane she said, "I never looked back," and I think that really made it final for her. So, we (troops) flew out to Travis Air Force Base and all, and then we changed to this--I called it "a school bus in the sky." It was Flying Tiger Airlines; obviously this government contractor that was making millions of dollars transporting troops to Vietnam. I called it "the school bus in the sky," because there's no first class or nothing. The seating went all the way to the cockpit, just like in a school bus. [laughter] So, my attitude then in this plane, this plane full of people like me, going to Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, right outside Saigon, to obviously [the war], I was not frightened at all. That's when I first-

-I was still in my Vietnam mode--I said, "Hey, this is it, man. You've got to make it." I said I didn't give a damn if the plane made it or not. I just said, "I'll probably get killed over here anyway. I'm going to try not to. All I need is a lot of luck." So, we flew. Going over is like a nineteen-hour flight or something, but it's the shortest flight in the world, man, when you're going into the war. Well, we stopped over in Alaska first, and then we flew to Guam for refueling, and then to Vietnam. As soon as our plane landed and all and we got off at another induction center, like, as soon as we got off, right there on the tarmac were these little, bitty guys in these black pajamas crouched down with blindfolds on. I asked this sergeant who was next to me--obviously he was going over for at least a second or third tour or something--I said, "Is that the Vietcong?" He said, "That's your enemy, man." I remember when we left, when we were in the San Francisco Airport, I had seen these little officers at the baggage claim [carousel]. There was another older "lifer," we called them, this guy was a sergeant major and all, and I looked at them, I said, "Who are these little guys?" He said, "Oh, those are our allies. Those are South Vietnamese Army officers," and I said, "These guys weigh about 120 pounds," [laughter] I told him. He said, "Yes, the South Vietnamese are really small people," and then, I said--I didn't mean to tell him this but I did--I said, "Damn, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. It's like all these giants going over there to fight this war against these little, bitty people," because I assumed the Vietcong was going to be the same size, but when I saw these prisoners on the tarmac there in Tan Son Nhut, [I realized]. We first went in these induction centers. This is when I slept on top of my uniform again too, only because it's 120 degrees and these bunks, you're only there for a night or two, so you know everybody's sweat in the world was on that thing. Soon as I put my head down this GI comes running in and says, "O-positive, we need O-positive blood. [A] platoon has been overrun. They just medevaced them in. We need blood now." I had taken this methamphetamine before I left San Francisco and stuff. I was a regular '60s guy. Everybody was messing with, on a recreational level drugs, but I had this speed to keep me up. I didn't tell them that. I told them I'd give because I'm an O-positive. We're the givers for everybody, and so I told him. He said, "Thanks a lot, GI. Come on with me." So, they went and they drew my blood. I was telling the guy, he says, "You don't have any diseases or," blah, blah, blah. I said, "No, I don't," and I was thinking to myself, "Yes, but I've got all this meth in me." I said, "That'll definitely help." [laughter] I said, "My blood is exactly what this shot-up GI is going to need to revive him." So then, after that I was assigned to the 25th

Infantry, in the III Corps, to Cu Chi, 25th Infantry Headquarters, which just happened to be the only base camp in all of Vietnam which had the most exhaustive [enemy] tunnel network of any place in the war. So, we went in on, like, a little--was it a C-130? Anyway, so it's a regular troop carrying [plane] where you're sitting on both sides of the aisle in these little net seats. The plane, Shaun, it went straight up in the air, it climbed for the longest time, and then came straight back down. [laughter] Because we were only going maybe sixty miles from Saigon, northeast of Saigon. So when we got there, Cu Chi, see, we had totally defoliated that area. So all it was was little huts, little hooches we called them, for each platoon and all. The MPs, of course, we had our own little area, maybe we had about six hooches for ourselves. There, I was assigned to convoy escort duty and I had this--this is where luck came [in] again--I was assigned for the first jeep, the lead jeep, and my driver was Tony Gravangne. I was the gunner. I stood in the [jeep bed] with--at that point, yes, I had an M60 on our jeep then--but Tony Gravangne was the best driver that anybody could have. Number one lead jeep, you want to be lead jeep because you're instructed that--you could tell the priorities of importance in combat--convoys have the MP lead jeep. Right behind it [are] the fuel trucks, and then after that the "reefers," which [are] food trucks, and the troops are last in various troop trucks. But Gravangne could see, even on blacktop or a dirt road, he could see if the soil had been tampered with. In other words, he could find landmines, man. He had the best eyes in the world and ever since then, man, I always wanted to be in Tony's [jeep], to be the gunner for Tony's jeep. Because he was an Italian from New York, man [with a lot of street sense], but he was a very conscientious driver and MP.

SI: Had he been there for a while?

BM: I don't think [so]. Well, he probably had been there a month or two before me, but I was only stationed at Cu Chi for a little while, and by that I mean, a couple of weeks. But then they assigned Tony and myself to Dau Tieng, which was right next to the Michelin Rubber Plantation. It was the worst place in the world to have a little base camp because two-thirds of our perimeter was covered by Michelin rubber trees. One side was the Saigon River and then in the distance was the Go Dau Ha Mountains, where every single night practically, we got ["incoming"], artillery from the enemy. So, we're in this low point, I mean, the worst place in the world for a base camp. We're hemmed in. We really were hemmed in, because we've got acres upon

thousands of acres of Michelin rubber trees behind us and the river bordering the other side. We had to go across a bridge to leave the base camp and stuff, which the bridge could've been destroyed at any time. Of course, we guarded it, and you couldn't move the Go Dau Ha Mountains, [laughter] I mean, because Charlie--that's the Vietcong--they were [ensconced] there. They'd have a tunnel network in the mountains there and you couldn't get rid of them. We bombed that mountain repeatedly, but you just couldn't [get them]. We were close to the Cambodian border. We were leading convoys. I knew, when the little boy-sans and all didn't come up to a GI for C rations and all, you knew you were in enemy territory. Our maps never had boundaries on them, but, once Tony and I, we realized--we were given a route for this one day, this beginning day, it ended up being, of leading a convoy--we noticed that we had to go over this pontoon bridge. On the other side, the road consisted--it was a dirt road--but it consisted of boulders, rocks about this big. That meant that the engineers had *just* cleared this road for convoys, just. So, Tony and I knew then, because, before, when we'd go through a village or something, the little boy-sans would come up. They'd try to run up and say, "GI, GI, food, food," and we'd throw them a can of this or can of that and stuff, but, when we got over that Vam Co Dong River, boy-sans didn't say shit to us. [laughter] We knew that we were going into Cambodia right then and we were leading troops into Cambodia probably a whole two months before it was announced back here. The first time we led a convoy into Cambodia, I looked back and that's when I said, "This is clearly the most powerful goddam nation in the world," because the convoy behind us, Shaun, was as long as the eye could see, man, and, I mean, here we go again, fuel trucks behind us, reefers, the food trucks, behind the fuel trucks, and then, the troops. All mechanized trucks, the mechanized vehicles, would be next, and then, the two-and-a-half-ton trucks with troops in the back last and all. Occasionally, if we got hit--see, this is why I ride in the front jeep--if we got hit, we're instructed to haul ass, gun it, to get those fuel trucks through, because none of our mechanized units that we'd left in the jungle the last day and stuff, they don't have any means of getting fuel. So, I felt sorry for--we'd have MP jeeps interspersed, maybe every fifty vehicles or something, for control--but, as long as you're in that front jeep, you know if they got hit, if the convoy gets hit, we get the hell out of there. Those guys have to be back with the infantry guys fighting, but we had to get the gas through, the fuel through and the food through. Then, once we got to Dau Tieng, I mean, like I said, we got hit almost every night. All the fighting's at night. Only landmines and stuff you hit during

the daytime, but, once, I know a sniper--this is why you need luck in war--because something went by [my head]. I had my steel helmet on, but something [Mr. Mitchell claps his hands], it felt like somebody slapped my ear, man. I couldn't hear out of it for a couple days, but that just meant, Tony says, "Yes, a sniper just missed your head, man." He said, "That was a round that went that close to your head, to your ear," and he said, "That was the shockwave from it that hit you." So, you realized. Oh, plus, in Dau Tieng, we had three jeeps, but our jeeps were unauthorized, because we didn't have M60 machine-guns. We had fifty-caliber machine-guns on them, these guns, which meant, for the back of the small jeep, see, we had to have a steel plate that covered the whole back behind the two seats and bolted in, because these guns were so powerful that, if we got hit, if I had to shoot perpendicular to the direction of the jeep, I couldn't do it, because it would flip it over. It would flip the jeep over--they were that powerful. So, you always had to [shoot at] an angle. If I'm going this way, I'd had to have an angle, but never perpendicular to the jeep, or I could turn it [to] shoot behind [or forward] and stuff. Periodically, the brass from Cu Chi would come up to inspect us. Cu Chi was like a regular [infantry division] headquarters. Cu Chi was so protected, it never got hit hardly, but, where we were, [Dau Tieng], and as vulnerable as our site was, we fought a lot where we were. They'd come up and they'd say, every time, "You guys have to change this weaponry on this jeep, on these jeeps, because they're unauthorized. You're only supposed to have an M60 machine-gun on this thing." Our sergeant would tell them, "We'll do it, sir, we'll do it," and, as soon as they turned their backs, he said, "I'll be goddamned. They don't do anything down there, [Cu Chi]. We have to fight up here. We need this firepower," and we never changed it. That's why the United States really did not know how to fight a guerrilla war back then. We learned on-the-job training and the brass, they would always have these darn regulations that just don't apply in a combat area, but, yes, the guys we had there [were good]. Being an MP, too, we were able to go into the village, because we had our own jeeps and stuff. We could go into the village and where you'd hang out is the brothel. Every area where there are GIs, there's going to be prostitutes and, where there are prostitutes, the prostitutes learn to speak English. So, it's another aftereffect of the war, is that an apple in Vietnam would cost a dollar, way back then, because of the black market and stuff. However, a prostitute could make five dollars from sleeping with one guy for forty-five minutes or something. So, as an MP, we're supposed to be going down there to keep GIs out and stuff, but we didn't give a damn. Hell, we even used prostitutes sometimes ourselves, but the thing is,

a buddy of mine, two buddies of mine, we'd sneak prostitutes in at night, into the base camp, and I think that the brass turned their heads the other way on that. We'd sneak them out in the morning, when, like, we're going down to the gate to man the gates and stuff. We'd sneak the girls out in the morning. The thing about it is, they said we shouldn't be hanging out down there. "It's against Army regulations," right. However, we soon realized that we'd ask one of the mama-sans, [the brothel madam], "Can the girls come in tonight?" and they'd say, "No." You know what that meant? We're going to get hit that night, [laughter] because they have VC; some of their brothers and fathers and stuff are members of the VC, of the Vietcong. So, when they wouldn't come in, whenever they said they wouldn't come in that night, I'd go back and I'd say, "Hey, we're going to get hit tonight, man. So, don't think you're going to sleep." Oh, another thing I learned in Dau Tieng is that, because we were always hit at night, I knew I had to catnap as much as I could during the day, because you ain't going to get any sleep at night. Another pretty thing was, we had these red tracers and the Vietcong [and North Vietnamese regulars], the enemy, had green tracers. So, for fighting at night, you needed to know where your bullets are going, really. That's why every five rounds in your ammo belts and stuff would be a tracer and, if you saw a firefight at night, man, if you just didn't think that this thing is to kill you, it's one of the most beautiful sights you'd ever seen. I mean, it's like the Fourth of July whenever we were getting hit, because they would try to sneak in the wire at night, underneath the barbed-wire and all that. We had Claymore mines out there. Claymore mines were mines full of explosive pellets, of shotgun pellets, and, if one was tripped or whatever, they'd blow out like that and kill the sappers. You called them sappers. Our job was to clear the wire every morning. If we got hit that night, we'd go out and, if there's a body there, take a cord, like fishing cord, tie it around. Without disturbing the body, you'd tie it around one arm or one hand, like that, and then, you'd stand back about twenty yards and slowly pull the body over, because, before they'd die, they'd take a grenade that they had, take the pin out and lay on it. If you came there [and turned the body over], "Boom," you'd blow yourself up. One day, this buddy of mine, Morton, who was an MP, too, from Pittsburgh, we were clearing out the wire one morning and Morton had turned over a dead sapper [with a chord], and then, he just turned red. I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "I can't believe this." I said, "What's wrong?" He said, "That's my barber," who used to shave him with a straight razor, man, and he finds out that this guy was Vietcong. He's coming in. He said, "Hell, he could've cut my throat any time." There's all little things like that in war. There

was another sergeant, Masterson, who was an Army lifer, who was, like, one of the top, who could've been a master sergeant. But he wouldn't accept the next grade, because it would've meant that he'd have to go to headquarters [and sit behind a desk] and he wanted to fight. He was a skinny, little guy, skinny white dude from Missouri or somewhere, who was the first person I'd ever met [who lived to fight]. He had two jeeps, he'd have an M60 on each and [two] Cambodian boys [to man each mounted M-60 machine gun]. He'd have a GI, two GIs, in each. Himself, a driver, and two other GIs in the next one, but the other four guys in each jeep would be Cambodian kids, like scouts. They'd go out on ambush every night. He liked me so much he wanted me to go out with [his squad] one night. I kept making excuses, man, because once you go out on an ambush, you have to stay still for the entire night. You can't move, you can't pee. Oh, another thing, too, you don't wear any odors. You stink in war, because the Vietcong can smell anybody's toothpaste, deodorant. They can smell that, but, for some reason, the regular human body, they won't pick that up. On the trail, they can be walking maybe three feet from you in pitch-black jungle, wouldn't smell you then. But if you had some cologne on or some crap like that, they could. So, when you'd go out with Masterson like that, you've got to be ready. You have to be prepped for at least a whole day to be suitable to set up for ambush, but he was the first guy I knew, man, that had M-16s [with silencers]. His people had M-16s with silencers on them, man. This guy was a pure mercenary, man. He told me--he was on, like, his fifth or sixth tour--he said, "When I go back," he said, "Mitch, I can't handle it." He was about thirty-some years old and he said, "I'm not a civilian. I can't take civilization." He said, "I'm a soldier." He said, "I'm hired to kill people." He said, "I'm a very good killer," and he said, "As long as I'm here, I'm happy as all get out." Oh, I forgot to tell you about a part. Sergeant Askins, in basic training one day, before we went to the shooting range, he says, "How many of you guys have shot, have hunted before?" Three-quarters of the guys raise their hand. He said, "How many have never shot a rifle before?" maybe one or two. He said, "How many people have shot a rifle maybe once or twice before?" So, I put up my hand, and then, he said, "Mitchell, I'm going to make you the best sharpshooter in this whole brigade." I said, "How are you going to do that, Sarge?" He says, "You're going to listen to every word I say, I'm going to show you how to shoot," and he said, "and then, when we have our finals, your final test," he says, "you're going to be the number one shooter, because you haven't developed." It's like golf, "you haven't developed any bad habits. I'm going to show you how to do it right the first time," and so, for

the next five days, we, [the entire company], were going to the shooting range. The targets [ranged] from fifty yards to 350 yards. Now, first, once you're assigned your M-16, you have to what you call "zero it in." In other words, every weapon, its sights are not exactly coordinated with the rifle [barrel]. The guys got mad at me, because it took me the whole day to zero in my weapon, but that's because I listened to Sergeant Askins. He told me, he said, "Now, Mitchell, I don't want you pulling the trigger." He said, "I want you to take [your time]. Breathe in a half breath," and he said, "relax." Then, he says, "After you take your half breath," he says, "you're just squeezing. You're squeezing this trigger so gently that I want you to be startled when the rifle goes off." He says, "If you pull that trigger, you're doing some unnecessary movements that are going to [throw you off]." So, after I finally zeroed my weapon, the next day we were going to have our trials. Out of eighty-five targets I hit eighty-three. I didn't miss one target at 350 yards. It got so that I was shooting so well that the whole company was standing behind me, because I was still shooting, knocking them down, man. Everybody, Sergeant Askins, he'd tell them, he said, "You get through, you go over there and stand behind Mitchell and watch. I'll show you how you're supposed to [shoot]." Well, what that almost did is it almost made me a sniper. I just told them, I said, "No, I can't." A sniper in Vietnam, you've got about five days' worth of rations and stuff and you've got to pee and crap and everything in your pants in the tree and you can't move. Another very interesting experience I had by being a convoy escort MP. One time, when we dropped some guys off in Cambodia, we had to take this GI back to base camp. He was a sniper. I knew that when he was carrying an M-14, which is an old Marine's weapon, and he had a silencer on it of course. He got in, man, and I'd start talking with him and I said, "Man, why are you going back now?" He says, "I've got to zero my weapon again." No, he said, "I have to clean my weapon." I said, "You've got to go all the way back to base camp?" He said, "Oh, yes, when I go back I have to clean it, and then I've got to zero it in again." I said, "Well, how long have you been doing this?" He says, "I've been over about a year, almost a year now." I said, "What's your record?" He said, "I've got thirty-some confirmed kills." I said, "Goddamn, here I am with one of the top snipers in Vietnam," and he was just a regular [guy], as you can guess, very calming, unassuming. I guess he was about five-ten, five-eleven, 165 pounds, quiet, but just totally at peace. [laughter] I hadn't met anybody like that over there, totally at peace with himself. I kept thinking, I said, "Yes, this is what they wanted to make me," just meeting people like that. Oh, also, my last couple of weeks--I met Christian, though in Dau

Tieng, when he was in Dau Tieng in the infantry--and the last two weeks in, I had to go back to Cu Chi. They'd send you off back to base camp, to get ready to go back home. There was this white guy named Christian, a pretty good buddy of mine and stuff. One day when they were out, they found a cache of weapons--and I have the weapon now, upstairs--he got me a Chinese Communist pistol, 7.62 round. I gave him two hundred bucks for it, but when I got back to the base camp, that last two weeks, I go into the--you know those containers that they have on container ships? We'd use those for holding cells, the MPs would, for jails, temporary places. We'd cut out slats with a welding gun, they'd cut out parts so [that] you can breathe and all that kind of junk. It's a portable jail cell. So, I go in one day into the desk, the MP bunker, and there's Christian inside. I said, "What are you doing here?" I knew he was a heroin addict. I said, "What are you doing in here, man?" He said, "You know the donut dolly that was killed?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I'm a suspect." I said, "What the fuck did you do that for? Why are you?" He said, "I didn't do it," he said, "but I knew her, but I didn't kill her." So, I only had a couple of weeks left. So, years later, I was getting nostalgic and I was checking on Dau Tieng, where our base camp was, and then I started doing some stuff on Cu Chi, about the tunnels and stuff. Then, I discovered the donut dolly. She's a Red Cross girl who was killed, this gorgeous looking blonde chick was a general's daughter. And then I read, man, I read the whole thing. Christian was absolved, man. They found the guy who had done it but Christian had been in prison for, like, two years until they could finally realize that he wasn't the guy who killed her. This is, what? This is just a couple years ago. I went and saw an entire coverage of that episode. I said, "Nobody knows, man, this guy was a buddy of mine. Nobody knows it," because no one from there is with me now, is a friend of mine now. It was a very creepy feeling, man, but I felt good for him. Finally, they found the dude who did kill her. Oh, talking about being short, which means you've got a little time left in-country, once when I was down in Dau Tieng I was down at the main gate checking out [workers], because Vietnamese would come in and work every day, do laundry and stuff like that, and then, go out. We'd have to search them all the time. Herbie, the guy who used to clean our bunker and all, I'd search Herbie because Herbie would have steaks, [laughter] steaks, chicken, a can of beans here and there, stuff like that. [I] said, "Hell, yes, man, I'm letting Herbie get out with this crap." Herbie invited us to dinner one time in his hooch in the village, raised clay like this and then just no sides, but a thatched roof and stuff and a little wooden table and chairs and all--and our food. [laughter] What's cool, Shaun,

they were all Buddhist and we're sitting there at the table, a buddy of mine and Herbie and his family. We're sitting there and he has two Hostess Twinkies at the end of the little table and stuff. This mouse comes up, starts eating on one of the Hostess Snowballs. Herbie didn't do anything about it, so, I said, "I'm not going to do anything about it," but they don't [mind].

Animals and themselves are one. So, you tell an American that, they'd freak out, having a meal and a little mouse comes in and eats part of your dessert, and then goes about his way. One time when I was in the village too, I looked in this one hooch. I'm telling you, Shaun, there had to be a five hundred-pound sow, man, sleeping on [a mat]. See, all their beds, it's so hot there, they're just platforms and they'd have vinyl, like a vinyl mat no thicker than that but porous and all, and that would be what you slept on. Well, there's a five hundred-pound pig, man, sleeping on the main bed in the little hooch, but it was just a totally [different world]. The infantry guys I knew and all, it was just totally [different]. Oh, we [MPs] had to take care of the guys, man. Some of the kids would get a "Dear John" letter from home, go to a secluded place, "Boom," blow their heads off, I mean, *from a girlfriend*. It was the saddest thing you'd ever want to see because this wasn't your wife, the mother of your children even. There were some guys I met, I met this one guy from Chicago who, oh man, he was not going back. When he went home, the antiwar sentiment was so bad--and he was from Chicago--that he went home once, found out his wife was sleeping with another man and all that stuff. So, when he came back from his R&R, [rest and relaxation], his two weeks, he said, "I'm not going back home." What he did, he said he ordered these stripped little mini dresses and stuff from Sears Roebuck and he said, "I'm going to start a shoeshine stand with these gorgeous women in Saigon." He said, "I'm not going back home. I don't want to go back home." This is a black guy, of course, and he says, "I'm not going." There was another guy, another black guy I met when I was at Cu Chi, at the headquarters. He was a specialist. His assignment was to run all the clubs on the base camp at Cu Chi, except this guy was skimming. This guy's making money, man, on the black market, man. I don't know how he got that Military Police money [military payment certificates] converted to American dollars and stuff, but this guy was making big money off these clubs by bringing in prostitutes, offering prostitution, selling them liquor. The only beer we had over there was, like, three percent alcohol beer and stuff. He would get the hard liquor and stuff but he ran these clubs and he had all kinds of illegal crap going through them and stuff. He went home rich, damn near, but you met all kinds. Another thing I'd have to do when guys were going

on their two weeks of R&R to wherever, Honolulu, Bangkok, Hawaii, they'd get in the two-and-a-half-ton trucks. They'd sit up front; all the GIs' luggage would be filling the whole back of the truck. I told them when they'd leave the base camp, I said, "You've got to put a GI on the back of the [tuck bed], near the tailgate. You've got to put a GI [there] or you're not going to make it to Tan Son Nhut Airport, man, with all the luggage," and they wouldn't believe me. They said, "Well, I can see right here from the cab," right? Shaun, the Vietnamese were so ingenious, man. They'd all be on little mopeds. There'd be a guy, [passenger on the moped] with a long staff with a hook on the end. A moped is narrow enough that the drivers of these two-and-a-half-ton trucks can't see that low and somebody right behind them in the middle [of the lane]. They'd hook a luggage bag and let it fall out on the side of the road. They'd get another one, let it fall out on the side of the road. By the time the GIs got [to the airport] for R&R, about ten of the bags would be missing. The little Vietnamese dudes, man, they'd go through that stuff and sell it on the black market. [laughter] Also, on the convoys and stuff, we had to instruct the GIs not to eat your C rations and throw them on the side of the road because the Vietcong used those jokers [cans]. They would take a C ration can, cut off the top, [attach] an electrode or wire with wax on the top lid, and then, put [the other electrode] on the bottom, and then fill it with water with the paraffin around [the lid edges], put it back. [The water] would evaporate. Once it evaporated, it set off a fuse on a rocket to just shoot into a base camp or whatever, but they had all kinds of ingenious things. You'd see, some of the hooches, they wouldn't have thatched grass as sides--all the beer cans that we'd throw away and discard on the side of the road, they'd open them up, make shingles of them. War makes you very ingenious, very innovative. So everything we refused, they used, everything.

SI: You spoke earlier about the claymores that were placed at the perimeter.

BM: Yes.

SI: I have also heard that the VC would take the claymores and put them in different places or turn them around.

BM: Yes.

SI: Did you ever run into that?

BM: Sometimes, sometimes. Number one at Cu Chi, Cu Chi was, like I said, so defoliated and everything, they were safe, man. Nobody could get close enough to them. It was all flat for as long as you could see but where we were, like I told you, we had [a mountain range] and stuff but our base camp was small enough that we could peruse, we could check out, our perimeter on a daily basis, but you're right. One night we'd have GIs, the infantry guys, once they came in out of the field in their mechanized vehicles and stuff. Once they're in their tracks, they would have to do guard duty at night, at various posts [on our perimeter]. We'd have dirt built up as a berm line and our barbed-wire and everything and the claymores and all would be beyond that. In these little posts of guard stations and all, we'd tell the GIs, "Man, look, don't start smoking dope up here and fall asleep." But I'm going to tell you, one time when I was in Dau Tieng, because our, [the MPs], job was to check up on the [the perimeter guards] in our jeep, we'd go around the perimeter and check on [them]. See if the guys are awake. One time [an MP patrol] went there and asked, "You guys awake?" [We] didn't hear [anything]. [They] went up [to the guard bunker]--man, all of them had their throats cut. Charlie had sneaked in the wire and sneaked on out and we never knew. But that, like you said, they would go in and they'd reverse claymores, they'd do anything they could. We couldn't detect it all but yes, those were the parts of war [of war]. Once you got over the feeling that--oh, I forgot to tell you, after I was there maybe six months, I stopped writing home. I didn't realize until I got back--well, after about two months, the Red Cross traced me down and they said, "Your parents want to know if you're all right." When I got back home my dad told me, he said, "When you stopped writing, your mom almost had a nervous breakdown. We had to take her to the hospital and everything, because she was so worried about you." My mom told me, "That's when we started leaving the radio on all night. The day you left for Vietnam, we listened to the news twenty-four hours a day, just in case we'd hear what's going on over there," and then, I felt real sorry about, at that time, just not writing back home because I didn't know if I was going to get back home anyway. I mean, like I said, I had to go into my Vietnam [mode] to survive. In that way, I was able to observe and appreciate everything that was happening in war. I can tell you, in Vietnam especially, it's total boredom but fighting at night, man, [was exciting]. I saw another thing, when I was researching the war,

that Vietnam soldiers fought twenty times as much as a soldier in World War II. We spent twenty times as much time in combat than they did. You wouldn't think that because we see all these huge campaigns from World War II, but evidently, other than those fighting campaigns, they weren't doing anything. That's what it is in war, a lot of idle time. Hey, once I made it back [home] unscathed, I wouldn't have traded it for nothing. It was one of the best experiences of getting to know people when it counted. I had this one friend in Dau Tieng, he was a black guy from Alabama and he also had the best marijuana of anybody in [camp]. [laughter] Shaun, he had a security clearance because he was in charge of the JP [jet propellant] fuel for the helicopters. Consequently, his bunker was at least ten feet underground, and all sandbags and steel above it. He also, Shaun, had one of the best stereo systems I have ever seen in my life. His name was Benson and he liked me a lot. I used to hang out with--Shaun, I never arrested one GI in Vietnam because I said, "Damn it, all of us are here to fight a war and, if a GI's having some problems, let's get him help. We're not locking him up for breaking any kind of stupid regulation. How are you going to have a regulation as long as he's obeying his orders in combat?" Benson, man, to relax here I'd go see him at night in this bunker. We could blast the music as loud as we wanted to and get as high as you wanted to and you didn't worry about anything because he had a top-secret clearance. Not even an officer could go into his place uninvited but he had to live in this place alone. But once we found out, man, the sound system he had, we had to go there and listen to music, Jack. I mean, God, it was crazy. That's why I've told people too, one of the more accurate depictions of Vietnam was *Apocalypse Now*. You know when the guys were skiing on the Saigon River and stuff like that? I'm sure those dudes down in Saigon could do that stuff. Now, if you were in an area that fought a lot, you wouldn't, but in Cam Ranh Bay, where part of that was done, hell yes. That was a resort town. Some of the GIs would take R&R at Cam Ranh Bay. You wouldn't leave the country. It was that kind of paradox. Here we are, here I am, in the middle of a combat zone, in a bunker, with one of the most expensive stereo systems I've ever seen in my life, partying with other GIs. And if we got hit, he had a special alarm that would go off because there's nothing he could do, man. If the JP fuel fields were hit, I mean, we'd be just up shit's creek. They had helicopters, see. The First Air Cav was our airborne unit and I knew a lot of those guys. Most of my buddies were grunts and they were either with the First of the Fifth Mechanized, where they were on tracks when they went out, or they'd be the helicopter guys and the helicopter Cobra gunships were just a pilot and

a gunner sitting behind. There was no God but a Cobra gunship. Whenever we were leading convoys and stuff, if we saw a Cobra coming along to assist us, to cruise along with us, man, I knew we were good. I knew we were going to make it home that day, because when you saw [them], they had those Gatling guns on the front, man. We called them "sewing machines," because that joker would put a 7.62 round every inch. Charlie hated them more than anything, because they'd sew you in half, man. At night, when I told you they had the tracers every five rounds too, when you saw those jokers, man, and us with our fifty-cals and our other mechanized [forces]. The mechanized guys with their fifty-cals and artillery and everything going off, I mean it was a light show, man. Then, we'd shoot up--the artillery guys would shoot up--flares, Shaun, that would make outside now look like dusk, man. I mean it'd be like a Hollywood set, just pure white light.

SI: At a place like Dau Tieng, would that be in response to the enemy trying to get through the wire?

BM: Yes, especially, but otherwise, if it was stuff coming off Go Dau Ha Mountains, it would be all artillery and helicopter fire. But hell, they say my fifty-cal, man, that you could hit something a mile away with that joker. I mean, I'm just trying to think of how many innocent people, when you've got [that much firepower]--we had these 175 [millimeter] artillery guns that could shoot twenty-three miles. I mean, that stuff was miles. When you heard those [big guns] go off, I mean, it's just like that lady said in Belgium just now [the March 22, 2016, suicide bombings at Brussels Airport], the pressure from that explosion coming through the terminal and stuff, I mean, that stuff, man. In Dau Tieng, see, our base camp was so small, man, artillery was right near us, boy. But, when those guns started pumping off, oh man, you talk about your adrenaline running. It's like I was here when 9/11 [happened], when they hit the Pentagon, when the plane hit the Pentagon. I heard it and everything. I didn't get upset about it at all and Madeleine called from work downtown. She was all upset. I said, "But, where did it hit?" She said, "It hit the Pentagon." I said, "Hell, that's three miles from here." See, to me, to a civilian three miles meant, "That's here." I wouldn't be worried about it unless it hit in the church parking lot right there because we had artillery coming in all the time, especially if they were mortars. If they were mortars, the guys who were sending them in are going to walk those

mortars [in]. Once I figured out what direction the second one hit from the first one, then, I knew whether to worry or not. Another thing, Shaun, all the latrines are outside of your bunker. You don't know how superstitious you're going to get, man, because, and I never understood this, the latrines were made out of corrugated steel on the side, and then, a screen at the top, and then, a corrugated roof, and then, like, a regular outdoor john, a hole, but with a cutout oil drum underneath, right. They'd only put sandbags, Shaun, about this high on the outside [four feet] and, right above it, right above head level, you see all these shrapnel holes in the corrugated steel, right. [laughter] So, if you had to go do a number two, you'd sit there, you'd say, "Hmm, I wonder if it's a good time for me to go?" It didn't matter, because, in the daytime, you could get artillery. You just wouldn't get any land attacks in the daytime, because, once, when I was down at the gate, we heard a rocket coming in. They go [Mr. Mitchell whistles] and, "Bam," hit a latrine. Our front gate was probably two hundred yards from there. I'll be goddamned if a GI hadn't been in there. He was three weeks short. He was going home in three weeks and he got taken out by this random rocket and that's one thing. The Vietcong and the North Vietnamese--oh, North Vietnamese is a whole different ball of wax. The North Vietnamese, if the South Vietnamese average 125, 130 pounds, North Vietnamese averaged 180, and they were very disciplined. The only reason I really saw one was, my last [few weeks], when I was back in Cu Chi, when I was two weeks short, they gave me guard duty at the hospital and I had to guard a North Vietnamese infantry guy. His intestines had been blown out and stuff. So, he had this bag attached to him where his bowels would excrete. This joker, this guy, man, he had to go to the bathroom, he had to stand up for something, and I offered to help him. Man, he looked at me, he said, "You put your goddamn hands on me, man, I'll..." Right then and there, I said, "Yes, boy, that's why the North Vietnamese Army is tough as shit, man." I mean, these guys were very well-trained soldiers and they're big dudes. You could tell the Chinese influence up north. You could tell the North Vietnamese are just a lot bigger, because they have intermarriage and everything up north; Southern Vietnamese, little agricultural guys. So, it's amazing. Oh, our Michelin Rubber Plantation, that was another cool thing about being an MP, man, we could cruise around anywhere we wanted. Shaun, they had the most gorgeous French mansions you'd ever want to see. A buddy of mine, we went into one one time, it was abandoned. It still had this original French painting on the wall. However, it had a big rocket-propelled grenade hole in it, but I was just saying, when this plantation--oh, and we had to, I forgot, we had to pay so many

hundreds of dollars for every rubber tree we destroyed. We had to pay Michelin--but these mansions, man, I mean, you could tell these were gorgeous plantations at the time. Oh, another thing, have you ever seen raw rubber?

SI: No.

BM: It's white, rubber's white. I didn't learn this until being stationed right next to the Michelin rubber trees, because some of the Vietnamese were still [working there] and they would cut out of the bark a spiral removal of bark. At the bottom, they'd have a wire around it with a little cup. What would happen, when they cut that bark, the tree would bleed, would bleed rubber, and the rubber would be caught in these little cups and it's white. It stinks, too, but it's all dyed for cars and stuff, because you can't drive around with white rubber tires. [laughter] So, they color it, but I never even knew that. What I learned from the Vietnamese, too, is it's the best oil cleaner or anything, too, Shaun, because if your hands were filthy from oil, changing the oil in the jeep or something like that, you just take raw rubber and do like this, [Mr. Mitchell rubs his hands together] and presto, [laughter] it removed it all, but it was just a totally [surprising thing]. One of my goals in life, still, I just don't have the money yet, because I want to take my daughter and my wife back to Vietnam. I understand there's nothing--I know it's not going to look anything like [what I saw]. As I understand, Cu Chi is now a jungle again and the money that they make from the tunnels, they even enlarged some of the tunnels, so [that] guys our size can fit in them, for tourists, but, yes, they had hospitals, schools, everything, right under our base camp, man, and we didn't know.

SI: You mentioned that the area was defoliated. Do you know if you were exposed to Agent Orange? [Editor's Note: Agent Orange, an equal mix of the chemicals 2,4,5-T and 2,4-D, was used extensively in Vietnam as a defoliant between 1962 and 1971. It has been linked to a number of health problems among those exposed, including heart defects, cancers and blood disorders.]

BM: Yes. Do you know, when I got back and I got married, Madeleine and I, we didn't have a child until--a fifteen-year honeymoon--until fifteen years later? I told her that I had been in

defoliated areas and I may have Agent Orange, I've been exposed to Agent Orange. So, I said, "I may be sterile," but what we said is that we weren't going to go through all of this fertility stuff and all of this stuff. Either it was meant to be or not. Here it was, fifteen years later, Madeleine conceived and [we] had a healthy daughter and stuff, but, yes, I was in areas where I was exposed to it, but, thank God, I was okay. Yes, it would shock me to see that Cu Chi, now, is just a jungle, because when I was there, it was all dirt, flat dirt, a huge base camp. Probably, in Dau Tieng, where we only had, at a maximum, when the troops were in from the field, we'd have maybe three thousand maximum, Cu Chi, I swear, Cu Chi had to have a population of at least fifteen thousand or something, yes. Oh, on every base camp, they had a tower for our sniper, which was not a position I would've liked either, because those guys used to get sniped themselves, in a stationary tower that's, what, a hundred feet up or something? No, I wouldn't like that.

SI: When you were running the convoys into Cambodia, was that from Cu Chi or from Dau Tieng?

BM: From Dau Tieng, yes.

SI: Okay.

BM: And, sometimes, we'd pick up. We'd meet and pick up some trucks from Cu Chi. Oh, another thing, when I knew for sure, we'd take the guys--we're lucky, see--we'd take the guys in, drop them off, and then, we could come back to Dau Tieng at night, but, one time, we went to pick up some [troops] who were coming in out of the field, a mechanized division--and I have a picture of this somewhere--but the driver, man, had a monkey on his shoulders. He had befriended this monkey and had a monkey pet, man, and some of my buddies told me that. This one buddy of mine who was with the First of the Fifth Mechanized unit, he said, "Mitch, I saw elephants and tigers in the wild, in the wild," and I said, "No, I would've freaked out on that." I had a buddy once, too, who was on ambush and a rat crawled up one leg, went by his gonads and came on out the other. He couldn't move, couldn't say a word, and then, Sergeant Masterson, when he was out with his guys, one time, he said one guy had a scorpion bite right during the

beginning of their ambushing, setting up. So, they couldn't move. He said, "By the next morning, that guy's whole arm was like a Michelin Rubber ad, you know I mean? huge," and he said they did get him [help]. Soon as he got in that one day, they were able to save his arm, but it was stuff like that. They have the coral snake; the GIs called it a two-step snake. This little guy was only this long and it's well-known, all over the world, it's one of the most poisonous snakes in the world. Yes, GIs called it a two-step snake because its poison was so toxic that you're lucky to be able to walk to any help before it would paralyze your whole heart and kill you. Now, in coming back, coming back was a different experience on the flight. I was scared to death coming back, because I thought maybe the plane may crash. Whereas when you're going into war, it was the shortest flight in the world, coming back home, longest flight in the world.

SI: What was the mood like on the plane?

BM: Most of the guys, people, were happy, but it was like a mixed feeling, because we also knew that there wasn't going to be a parade for you when you got home. You remember, the resistance against the war was really at its peak then--and especially the married [troops]. See, I already knew I'd lost my girlfriend, because my little adopted brother wrote and told me that he saw my girlfriend in this Corvette with this student from University of Virginia, because we lived in Charlottesville then. He saw her in a car with this [guy]. So, I knew that was going to [be there]. So hey, I wasn't going to go blow my head off over some lady, but [for troops] it was like a mixed blessing. You're glad you're coming back home in one piece, but you're scared to death, too, because, "How are you going to be accepted? Can you find a job? Are you mentally prepared?" I mean, I carried my pistol maybe the whole--my parents didn't know it--I probably carried my pistol about almost a month when I got back, knowing it's totally illegal. That was after I got a ten-day early out, because I was stationed at the Presidio when I got back [from Vietnam] for about four months. In the Army, I decided, "If I'm going to graduate school, I might as well go to law school and, if I go to law school, I am a Virginian, I ought to try to go to one of the best in the country, right?" I got into UVA Law and I got a ten-day early out from the Army [in order to start the fall semester]. I'm in the barracks, my barracks at the Presidio; the Presidio was one of the prettiest horticultural bases in the world and the MPs were the largest unit. It was Sixth Army Headquarters, no infantry units there at all, all just top brass and all spit-and-polish.

That's why they always assigned Vietnam vets to the other side of the Golden Gate Bridge. See, we were responsible for protecting it. They'd send us over on the side where all the bunkers were from World War II, to guard caches of [ammunition]. San Francisco Police Department put all of their contraband there. We guarded [the bunkers], but I was up there bragging, next to the last night, about how I never did KP, [kitchen patrol]. You know what happened--one of my buddies went to the Company Commander, said, "Mitch has been bragging about not having ever done KP in the Army." He said, "Oh, yes? Does he know he has it tomorrow morning?" [laughter] So, my buddies, they were jealous I was getting this ten-day early out to go to law school anyway, they said, "We're going to fix, Mitch, man. He's up here bragging." No, that was a beautiful experience out there, too, except I didn't have any money, man. I'm in one of the most expensive cities in the country on a spec four's salary. I think I was--what was I making?--four hundred something a month, I think. So, I couldn't exploit the area [for all it had to offer].

SI: Did you have any interaction with the antiwar movement there?

BM: Oh, Lord, it's a good thing you asked. Do you know what our biggest job was as being the biggest unit on the Presidio? running protesters and Indians off of Nike bases, abandoned Nike bases. I mean, that's what we spent all our time [doing], [chasing] protesters. It was pretty much a waste of time, though, because we really didn't have any confrontations, thank God. I mean, we never had to fight any demonstrators or anything. Just the mere threat of our being there was enough. Yes, that was the worst part of my being in the Army, is having to [do that], because I was against the war at that point, too. In California, there were a lot of Nike bases, a lot of them, and they were all abandoned now. Yes, they'd send us and we'd have to be up there maybe for a week, two weeks. Then, another company would come in and spell us, but, half the time, we were there as a deterrent, to keep protesters and all from occupying them, but, yes, that was beautiful, beautiful country out there.

SI: Looking at your time in the service, you went in not long after Martin Luther King's assassination, when many say race relations took a marked dive. How would you characterize what you saw in terms of how soldiers of different races got along?

BM: That's a good question. I meant to talk about that. Here's a piece of luck, I guess, too, bad luck maybe, but the 25th Infantry Division probably was the most racially divided out of all the divisions in Vietnam. Thank God, I had friends--there are always exceptions--we always had white friends who weren't white, [laughter] like Gravano and Morton and (Neil?). We always had white guys who the brothers accepted, but, otherwise, I think, in the field, during fighting, the only racial stuff you would see is, if it's a second lieutenant that didn't know what the hell he was doing, some of the black guys would kill him. Back on the base camps, yes, man, it was segregated, voluntarily segregated. I guess, as an MP, I had exposure to everybody and it was tough. It was really [tough]. That's why I'm glad I got the hell out of Cu Chi, because, at the Headquarters, you'd have all these infantry guys coming in with idle time and that's when you had most of the fights, from in the clubs, racial fights and stuff, then. During combat, in which I was never out there in the field with them, it's life or death then. You [don't have] time to [hate anybody], unless it's a leader who's going to kill you, get you killed, but, yes, in the base camps. That's why I am glad [I was at Dau Tieng], because we had a whole lot more trouble, I know that the MPs did, in Cu Chi. In Dau Tieng, we were so close to combat that our troops would be in and out. They'd be out in the field for a whole week, and then, they'd come in for a [week], maybe three days, and then, they'd go out for another week. We didn't have much time to put up with guys who had idle time, yes, but our division was known as one of the toughest to maintain peaceful race relations.

SI: I believe I also read that your division had a higher percentage of officer fraggings.

BM: Yes.

SI: How were those cases handled?

BM: From the Criminal Investigation Division. Those guys, [the CID], they would--I imagine it's just like when something happens here and the Alexandria Police think that they're investigating it, and then, the FBI comes in, and that's the same type of relationship CID had with us. Criminal Investigation Division would come in and handle all of those type [cases], anything that required a lot of investigation. You never got to know those guys. It's just like, I

guess, with the FBI--you never got to know exactly what they knew about a particular crime or what. Another dumb thing that we did over there, especially because the Michelin Rubber Plantation, see, had a runway--I mean, [the runway has] been there ever since Michelin [owned] the place, right--the stupid CIA people would fly from Saigon and stuff in an Air America Cessna, a King Air, with short-sleeved white shirts and ties on. They'd go in the village and probably talk with the village chief or mayor, do their work and all. Here we are, out there to fight, and these guys would come in, they didn't even have attire that would blend in more with the (damn?) population, [laughter] white shirts, man, white shirts and ties. They'd be short-sleeve, I must admit, and no jackets, of course, not when it's 100 to 120 [degrees], but it was just, to me, it was like "the Ugly American" again. What can you say? I mean, it's just as stupid as [when] they said, "We don't want you MPs hanging out at the whorehouse," when [the prostitutes] were the only civilians who spoke English and could give us intelligence.

SI: In terms of the relationship between the local Vietnamese population and the GIs, was there any abuse? Were there any friendships?

BM: Yes, there wasn't much interaction, other than the [Vietnamese] who came in to [do day] work. See, like I said, we MPs, I got to go down into the village practically every day. They loved us and I can say, honestly, that they're the nicest people. It depends upon which context you get to meet them in and I'm sure some of the ones who I thought were real nice and all to me were VC sympathizers, because, if their brothers and cousins and the males in their family weren't members of the South Vietnamese Army, they were members of the VC, VC sympathizers. So, I think, when you look at people like that as individuals, like Morton uncovers his barber coming in to kill GIs, I mean, he was the nicest guy in the world in the town to Morton, but that's why I like *Apocalypse Now*. I said, "You've got all these contradictions in war," that that's the reason why I think a lot of [the troops] get the syndromes and stuff when they come back home. That's why, if you're not mentally able to recognize all these darn contradictions in one issue, in one problem, it's not easy, but the [Vietnamese] were very nice to me. They were very nice, knowing American--it's another thing people don't understand, like Trump's talking about, "America's failing," and all that stuff and he doesn't know what the hell he's talking about. This is, by far, still, the most powerful and well-run country on this Earth.

Once you get to other places, you see, people look at us, especially in undeveloped countries, boy, they look at Americans and, I mean, it's almost like they see you as some kind of a savior. They only hear propaganda and everything, in advertising that we do, but they really have this sense that [American] people have some kind of a privileged life, that [our] lives are pretty cushy--and they're right, they're right. I would've had a very incomplete experience if I had just been an infantry guy and didn't have the freedom of movement that military policemen could have, because we had our own jeeps at our disposal. We could just cruise [around], because the village, once we left the gate, there was the bridge over the Saigon River there and there was Dau Tieng, the little village. So, it was five minutes outside the base camp and I'm in this little town that's got, like, one little Main Street, maybe. It's all dirt roads, but that's where their little commerce center is. There were people, you're right, Shaun, there are people who were not friendly, who would not talk with us or smile at us at all, who probably said, "I wish these people [would] go home and stop all this madness," but, for Herbie, our Vietnamese--what was he? He's like our caretaker? Yes, for Herbie to invite me and a buddy to his house for dinner in the village was [nice], but I guess he'd be the equivalent, though, of an "Uncle Tom" or something with GIs. I'm sure some of his neighbors had to be sympathizers, VC sympathizers. He probably had family members who were VC sympathizers, but, yet, he still invited us to his place for dinner. I'm sure, every war, it's like that. I guess it was in France like that for our GIs, in World War II, and in Holland. It's funny, because you've got to see whether people attribute it to your personality, also. We had some MPs, we had some dumb white boys, high school grads, who enlisted, right, merely to become law enforcement officers when they left the Army. So, instead of going to college and studying criminal justice or something for four years--and they probably didn't have the money for it or anything anyway--a very effective way of entering that field was to be a military MP. A lot of them were just racist white boys from rural areas [were on] a power trip and wanted to be state troopers, mostly is what they wanted to be, which is a position, to them, [that] allowed them a lot of authority over the masses, a nice uniform, you know what I mean? the whole image thing and power. You could tell that was their motivation and "to put all the bad people away," to kill them or whatever, but a lot of those [type of] guys [were] in the MPs. They weren't my buddies and all. I mean, I was cordial to everybody, but, yes, you could tell, you could tell what those guys were going to be when they got back. I didn't get to know them well and some of them, I don't even remember their names at all, but I wouldn't

be surprised if one of them [was involved] in one of these racial killings or something. I mean, I wouldn't be surprised one bit, but, yes, [the army consists of] all kinds. That's what's good about me going in as a regular troop, instead of as an officer, because you got to see, you really got to see, the profile of American citizens. I must admit, it was encouraging to me, because there were so many just good, solid, dutiful GIs. Really, I'm glad I was exposed to that.

SI: To jump forward, you said earlier that, when you came back, you carried a pistol for a little while. Did you have any other issues readjusting to civilian life?

BM: There was this one party. I must admit, I was a little mentally deranged to be doing that, once I looked back on it, but, once you live in a war zone and you sleep, I slept with--another thing, an MP could keep a forty-five with him all the time, my M-16 with me all the time, except I wouldn't carry it around in Dau Tieng, it would stay in our bunker--but my pistol always under my pillow when I slept [and always in my holster during the day]. When you do that, when you come back home, you actually feel not able to defend yourself. You feel a little bit insecure, physically. So, I went to this one party and it was at this one family, of mostly boys, very good athletes, five of them. I won't mention the names, the family name, but I went to a party there once when I had just gotten back. I had my pistol under my sport coat. They didn't like me much anyway, because, having gone away to prep school and stuff, when I used to come home, I had all the finest girls and everything and they didn't like that, because, then, I'd go back to school and not be [a part of their social life]. These guys, they had this party, because all of my old girlfriends would be there and stuff. I went in and one of the big brothers said, "Mitchell, we don't want you in our house," and I said, "Well, but, look, all the other folks you let in to [the] party." He said, "Yes, but we don't want you [here]." So, then, I showed him my pistol. I said, "Don't you think you can let me in?" He said, "Yes, under the circumstances, you're welcome," and the guy never said a word ever since then about it, but they said, "This guy just got back from Vietnam. He's crazy." So, he says, "I'm not going to say a damn thing. I'm not going to go upstairs and get my dad's gun or anything, because this guy, man, he'll shoot me first." Yes, I did that for maybe two or three weeks, I carried this pistol, but that was the only time that it came in handy. It made this guy more civil. He's dead now, too, I understand, but, yes, I settled, [adjusted]. It's amazing how the two different worlds are, though, because I have two neighbors,

about six doors down in the big yellow house, and they're both West Point grads, man. They have two little kids, one's two, one's recently born, but I notice they wear civilian casual clothes to the Pentagon, and then, they put on their uniforms. So, military, still, it's still a different life, is what I'm trying to say. It's still how you relate and these are our own soldiers, how they relate to regular society. It's not easy, I guess, and, plus, you don't want to get to know people, because they're going to be stationed somewhere else real soon.

SI: You got out of the service ten days early to go to law school. What was it like to now be back in the classroom?

BM: People who know me now would say, "You would never be shy or bashful," but, once I looked back on it, I never should've gone to law school immediately. I should've re-acclimated to regular society and all, because, number one, no one in my family was an attorney. So, I had to learn a whole new language my first year at UVA Law. Plus, I'm sitting in these classes with Harvard, Princeton, Yale, former undergrads, who came to law [school], never went [anywhere else]. I don't know if I mentioned it to you before, but there were [only] four Vietnam vets in my whole class, out of 330, four. So, here it was, I'm learning this new language, I can honestly tell you, Shaun, my whole first semester, man, I was in a daze. It was just overwhelming. I mean, it was--you know what? It was all made psychologically by me, because, for some reason, I thought, "These guys, they've all heard the language before. They pretty much know and knew they wanted to be attorneys like their dads." I can almost say that probably a third of the class at UVA, Harvard, Yale and like that, they don't practice law. They go into their father's company as a counsel, things like that. They don't go just into [general practice]. If they practice corporate law, it's going to be for *their* company. So, you realized that and, if you let it affect you, it could affect your adjustment to law school, which I let it do to me. I mean, I can admit it looking back. Second semester, I started--the light came on. The first semester, you say, "Jesus Christ, how am I going to digest all of this stuff?" even just the legalese. It was overwhelming. So, that's it. So, after my first year, and then, I worked--I guess, when did I work for Legal Aid? I guess the first summer, and then, the second summer for Lowe and Gordon, which was a small law firm in Charlottesville with one of the top defense lawyers in the country, John Lowe. So, when did I take [a leave]? Was it after my second year? See, I got kicked out. It was after my

first year. I got kicked out because you were not allowed to make a "D" in UVA Law. Even though my average was a "B" average, if you just got one "D"--it was in trusts and estates--they asked me to stay out. They said, "Stay out a year," and that's the year I worked with Lowe and Gordon. I learned a whole lot about the law working there, and then, I went back the year after that. It was a piece of cake after that, because I knew the game then and I had, I think, made a lot of psychological adjustments. I wasn't scared to speak up in class like I was that first year. In that first year, [you were a member of a] small section and a small section [consisted of] fifteen students. Otherwise, all your classes were huge, in an auditorium, like, you see [in] the movie *Paper Chase*? It's just like that. It's just like the Harvard [System]. The Harvard System uses the Socratic [method]. UVA uses the Socratic method just like Harvard teaches law, and Yale, and you'd be frightened to death, because the professor did have your seat and a name chart right before him. If you hadn't understood the case assignments that well that day for that particular class, you'd be scared to death, man, that the professor would call on you. I just think if I could've done that first year all over again, I would've gone in with a hell of a lot more confidence. Here's to let you know how much I knew about law school--one of my parents' friends, whose husband was a professor, English professor, at University of Virginia, she asked me, and this was right before I was going to law school, she asked me, was I going to make law review? I didn't know what the hell law review was. Law review is [comparable to making an undergrad] dean's list. I had no idea what law review was, [laughter] but that showed you, it was total culture shock. I got in there because my law apps were good and I was a good student at Rutgers, but [I] was just thrown into this, to me, pressure cooker, after what I had just experienced [in the Army]. Probably, if I had worked a year--oh, Shaun, another mistake I made, during the first week in law school, this guy comes up and makes an announcement in one of the huge lecture halls. He was a representative from the Colgate Darden Business School, which was right across the square from the new Law School. He says, "We have three seats left in the B School if any of you are interested in joining the joint JD/MBA program," and me, having just gotten out of the Army and all that stuff, said, "An extra year of school? Are you kidding me? Are you crazy?" but just young and dumb, young and shortsighted, but I could've come out of there with a JD/MBA all just behind me, but, see, where my head was at that time in my life, no way. [laughter] Law school, if you think--you have a graduate degree, right?

SI: Yes.

BM: What do you have, a master's?

SI: Yes.

BM: Yes, but you took it at Rutgers?

SI: Yes.

BM: See, that's a little different, because you were still at home, but graduate school's totally, as you experienced, too, it's a totally different mindset and all than college. There's no ancillary stuff [like sports, etc.].

SI: No social life.

BM: No social life, no. It's just all serious stuff, man. My mother says, "Yes, if you weren't so busy flirting with all the girls and everything, I think you could've made law review," but, hey, my head wasn't there, wasn't there at the time. Second and third years, I really enjoyed it, really liked it. Of course, all your classes, most of your classes then, were electives, see, and seminar style, a hell of a lot more interesting. Plus, law school could be two years. This three-year stuff must be [for the school to] make a little money or something, I don't know. [laughter]
Everybody will tell you that, yes.

SI: Do you want to take a break?

BM: Yes, I will take a break.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Ready?

BM: Yes, we're ready.

SI: We just came back from our break. Thank you very much for lunch, I appreciate it. We were talking about your years in law school. You said that the second two years were easier, because of a number of different reasons. We were talking about the class size and the fact that you could select your electives. Was that the period when you decided to go into real estate law?

BM: No. It's a good thing you asked that, too, because I told you I decided, while I was in the Army, I saw so much injustice and all--and I'm sure some of the racial divisiveness I talked about, too, had some effect on that--however, I went to law school with this idealistic viewpoint of justice, preserving justice. Then, once I got there, I realized that it's not about that at all. It's all about money, [laughter] because the University of Virginia has a very, very respected corporate law reputation, very respected on Wall Street, for the Wall Street major law firms. I didn't realize that, either. It's like I told you before, I was the first one in my family to ever go to law school, and so, it was all new to me.

[TAPE PAUSED]

BM: Okay, so, where was I?

SI: We were talking about your law career.

BM: Oh, yes.

SI: The Wall Street reputation.

BM: And I realized that I was taking all sorts of general law courses when I should've been taking corporations [law courses]. You took the basic course, but I should've been taking other [courses], finance and law, things like that, but you know what? That's why I'm not practicing now. It's because I realized that the way the law really is structured and how it's an adversarial

system--most of my friends now, who are big senior partners in law firms and on their second and third families, with two and three sets of kids and all, they're making over a million dollars a year, and then, they don't understand why they don't have any money. I said, "It's because you're a very, very good attorney, but you just don't know basic math. You've got three sets of kids and you're maintaining that standard of living that your law reputation allowed you--you spend too much money." Also, I think that the adversarial system has caused a lot of them to look at the world in a fairly cynical manner, but they all did confess, "If I could get off this treadmill, I would do it, because," they say, "I don't know my first set of kids. I was working the whole time, eighteen hours a day, trying to make partner. Now, the second set of kids, I got to know better, but I was still very engaged in the law, but, after my third set of kids, I have all associates, but it's just I don't feel the pressure that much anymore and I take time off for my kids," but the adversarial system adds to that cynicism that they have. I think it's sad. They all said, "Yes, if I could do something else, I would love to do it, but, now, I've just got too many financial obligations and social responsibilities to do otherwise." So, that's why, after law school, I practiced administrative law with the [government]. I was the assistant to the head administrative law judge of Social Security and, of course, he was a University of Virginia graduate, years before me and all, but that clearly is how I got the job, with that connection. So, we moved up here to Northern Virginia, after I graduated, and I practiced administrative law for about two-and-a-half years. Then, I discovered, because I was really a bureaucrat, I used to work on reviewing claims for black lung disease from West Virginia and Pennsylvania miners and found that, many times, the administrative law judges would [knee-jerk question the sincerity of] the claims of [the claimants], despite the fact that, when I reviewed their cases, that their lungs were darker than asphalt, and then, the administrative law judge still wouldn't grant them a disability. I'd talk with my boss about it and I said, "Phil," his name was Phil Brown, I said, "Phil, I want to reverse half of these claims, man. I mean, I want these claimants to get the benefits. I think our judges are [wrong]." He said, "Well, the ones that you feel should be overturned, we'll do it." He said, "I'll sign it." So, that's the only way that I survived those two-and-a-half years. I was needed and I could do something that could affect some people who clearly, clearly had black lung disease, but, then, meanwhile, I was getting a little bored, too, with it. I learned how to keep my case level pile just high enough to show that I'm working eight hours a day. I started investing, dabbling in real estate on the side, and then, I found out, and this

area was still growing a lot, I said, "Well, darn, if I do business, I like this. I like real estate." I said, "The buyer's happy, the seller's happy and the broker's happy." So, I said, "I'm going to try this." So, I did it part-time for, like, a year-and-a-half and I did so well, I said, "I've got to let the government job go. I know I'm not going to enjoy it anymore at all. I'm just bored with it." I was bored with the bureaucratic atmosphere and, also, with Social Security, the political appointee was the one who really ran that branch and my boss was a career [government executive]. He was the [chief administrative law judge] over all the administrative law judges. When it came time for promotions and things like that, too, my boss could put me up, but the appointees are the ones who are going to take the guys that they want, they really want. So, I'm just piecing all of this together, and then, I find out I'm real happy when I'm doing real estate deals. That's when I gave up the government job.

SI: What year was that?

BM: That was, let's see, it had to be about '75 to '78, yes, '78 or '79, yes, because I became a broker in '86. So, I was a salesperson, yes, with Mount Vernon Realty up until then, and then, I went out on my own, because I wanted, after two years of exposure to residential real estate, I knew, and with my law background and everything, I wanted something a little bit more challenging and could be lucrative. So, that's why I started just doing commercial real estate transactions, because your customers in commercial real estate, they have a particular need that they know and it's primarily the location of where they want their building, their business to operate. Whatever that building needs and changes to accommodate his particular type of business, they do it. So, it's not like--I lost this one sale in residential real estate. Now, you've got to remember, this is like thirty-five years ago, a 250,000-dollar house was a very expensive house then. I lost this one sale because the wife--the house had four bathrooms, one of the bathrooms had pink tile in it, like they used to back in the '50s--because of that, she wouldn't buy that house. I told her, "I will pay to have the tiles changed for you," [laughter] but she couldn't make the connection. In other words, in residential real estate, the emotional involvement is just as important as the physical requirements they need, whereas with a business deal, the businessman needs the location and he's going to customize the interior of that space to his liking, to accommodate the most efficient work usage for his company. In other words, there's

less emotion by far involved in commercial transactions than in residential ones. So, yes, I was at home then. So, I've been doing that for, like, thirty-five years and it's very risky. I mean, it goes [in cycles]. You have bad times. Like, the first big recession, I was probably two months from bankruptcy in 1990. That recession, probably two months from it, because if you didn't land--your deals may take a year, sometimes two years, to bring to closing--in that time, if you didn't save up enough nest egg, but that's a typical young broker's, that's a typical young person's, outlook on everything. You say, "Oh, if I get in trouble, I have time to recover and I have energy to recover," but, see, after that first one, I learned you've got to have your nest egg sitting aside to carry you through the recessions. So, after that, I loved it. You're your own boss. I think the primary thing I like about it is, because it's a transactional business, after you completed it, it's out, it's finished. Then, you get into something else that's totally different. So, each transaction [is different--different principals, different properties]. I guess what I'm saying is, you see a defined beginning and an end and you get paid accordingly. You get paid well for the big deals and you should make enough for sustenance with the little, everyday deals and stuff, but, now, the computer is changing our industry, just like it has the legal profession and everything else. There used to be a lot of regional firms in this area who had regional business contacts. You could do deals through those guys as an independent broker, make real good money, but, now, everything has become [national] and it's all due to the rapid communications, due to the Internet. Now, companies want one-stop shopping for all their real estate needs and the big companies, then, came in and said, "Yes, we'd like to be in the Washington market--let's just buy [a regional homegrown] firm, because they're one of the biggest regional firms in Washington," and that's what they've done. So, what has happened is--it's almost like our population--the middle class is decreasing. What happened is, regional firms have practically vanished now. They're all not just national now, they're, because of the Internet especially, international firms and boutique firms, like me, little guys. So, we have to live off of the smaller deals now. Whereas before I could do--an example, it was a referral from a classmate of mine at Rutgers who became a patent attorney--he was opening their DC office and he gave me a call. So, I got them a deal in Downtown Washington.

[TAPE PAUSED]

BM: Well, anyway, I did that deal. It was 14,000-square feet, a ten-year lease and 180,000 dollars to me, I mean, but that's in the day when, as a boutique commercial firm, you could make real good money, especially Downtown. Now, the rental rates out here in Northern Virginia would be half as much as the central business district rates Downtown and that's why you never give up your DC license and you never give up your Northern Virginia license. I used to have a Maryland license, too, but, after four years, I found out I never did one deal over there. Then, really, as a small firm, too, I was really probably geographically stretching myself too far, but, also, I realized, too, I'm a native Virginian--I think I have a deep-seated prejudice against Maryland. [laughter] So, I never regretted letting my Maryland license expire. Yes, there's a certain Virginia--this is weird coming from a black guy--but there's a certain Southern gentility that Virginians have. It's all attributed to the number of Presidents that have come out of Virginia in the founding years and stuff and, also, because Southerners, on the whole, are more genteel. The third thing is that, in Virginia, they're so arrogant that a politician would never think of taking money under the table or a bribe or so. That's why our last Governor is a first-time occurrence. You've never seen a Virginia Governor get caught up in any type of payment, questionable moneymaking transactions and stuff. [Editor's Note: In September 2014, Robert F. McDonnell, former Governor of Virginia, and his wife were convicted on federal corruption charges.] So, I think that, being a Virginia native, you look at Maryland, you just think that they're not as careful about ethics as we are. [laughter] I like real estate, also, because it is physical. It's there--you can see it. You can drive by and say, "Yes, I sold that building," or, "I put So-and-So, in that building," things like that. That really interests me. I remember, when I was a little kid, they thought I was going to be an engineer, my mother, my aunts and uncles and stuff, because I had an erector set and Tonka toys and all that kind of stuff. They always thought, say, "Oh, this guy, man, he likes [that], he'll be an engineer," but I'm not, I'm not. I don't like being tied down to formulas and stuff like that. I'm more of a people person and, Lord, you can't do anything in real estate without more people involved than you wish. [laughter] So, it's been [nice].

SI: Either outside of your business or as part of it, have you gotten involved in any community or civic activities?

BM: Yes, I did. As a matter-of-fact, before our daughter was born, in that first fifteen years--we moved up here right after I graduated law school, in 1975, our daughter wasn't born until '91--up until that time, I was totally involved. I was a member of the Red Cross. I later became, I was in the Red Cross for so long that--what was it?--in 2002, I became chairman of the Alexandria Chapter of the Red Cross for two terms. I was also, in the beginning times, on the board of the Friends of the Torpedo Factory. That's the arts center here that used to be a torpedo factory and was converted into a nonprofit arts studio facility and gallery. So, I was on the first board of it. I was also, at that time, on the board of the New Hope House. It was a halfway house for other than acute mentally disabled folks. It was for functioning folks suffering mental illness. In other words, they could hold jobs and things like that. Well, we had a mini mansion here in Alexandria and some local people got together and said, "We need an area for these people to become involved in society." So, I was on that board, and then, on our church, I'm an Episcopalian and, of course, I joined the church that's affiliated with Virginia Theological Seminary, because my father was the first black Virginian to graduate there, 1957 or '58, I think, yes. So, I joined Immanuel Church-on-the-Hill, which is that church, and I became a vestry member there for years, earlier. What else was I on? I was on quite a few things, but, when our daughter was born, I cut off everything but the Red Cross and that's when I was chairman. That was good. I could manage one [charitable organization] and, of course, my time commitments [with the Red Cross chapter] were a lot more than in the other smaller boards I was on. My daughter, that was cool, because my daughter would go to meetings with me at our Red Cross chapter. While she's there, because we had a media room and other activity rooms, she'd go watch movies, because we had a movie library there, too. I never knew this until she became older, that I just thought she had gone into someone's office and started reading magazines or something, but, no, she said, "Oh, yes, I saw that in the media room at the Red Cross chapter." [laughter] It's funny, too, because I used to take her whenever I had speeches and, if I could take her, I would. Then, she's a kid, I guess about eight years old but she said, "Dad?" I said, "What?" She said, "You were winging it today, weren't you?" [laughter] I said, "How could you tell?" She said, "Because I saw you just referring to the little index cards," and she said, "You talked too long to be just talking off of that little index card." I said, "Yes, but how did I do?" She said, "Oh, you did a real good job, as usual--you're so full of yourself." [laughter] It's been a real good life. I've surrounded myself--one thing I think my dad was very good at--it made me

able to evaluate people pretty fast, and so, I didn't have many friends, but I still have those best friends and I think it's because my dad instilled in me, "Regardless of what people look like or whatever, don't give up on mankind. There's still some good people out there," and he said, "Just pick them out, just be able to pick them out." It's funny, because you've seen all this variety of experiences I've had in my life. When I introduce my daughter to all my friends, from elementary school over the years, she's had a chance to meet them all, and then, she says, "Dad, you have the most motley group of friends of anybody I've ever seen," and she said, "Why? How?" I said, "But, do you see the common denominator?" She said, "No, I don't see the common denominator." I said, "Think about it," and she said, "Well, they all appear to be nice people and all, but, other than that..." I said, "You know what? None of them has ever told me a lie." I said, "In other words, all of them are very honest people. If they disagree with me, they tell me. If they like what I'm saying, they tell me. If something's wrong, they let me know," I said, "and that's it." I said, "You need to follow that creed." I said, "I learned it from my dad," and I said, "I'll tell you, Phillips, it makes life a heck of a lot more enjoyable." It's like my father taught me early on, he said, "Son, never lie, because you're not smart enough." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "If you lie, you've got to have a photographic memory." He said, "You've got to remember--number one, you've got to remember to lie. Number two, you have to know why you told it. Number three, you've got to understand the circumstances surrounding it." He said, "You're not that smart." [laughter] So, he said, "Don't do it, don't do it." My father should've been the lawyer, because he says, "What you learned in law school was to respect the facts only," and so, my dad said, "If you just do that, stick with the facts, even if they're against you, face the problem and move on, conquer it if you can, but a lot of things, you're going to lose in life." He said, "Don't let it kill your spirit. Move on to something else better," but it's been a good life, a good wife, good daughter, good parents.

SI: Before we conclude, when did you get married?

BM: 1975, the year I graduated law school. I graduated in May and got married September 6th--yes, September 6th. [laughter]

SI: You can edit that.

BM: Yes, happily married for forty years.

SI: Very good.

BM: I'm one of the few. Out of my class, I think I'm probably one of ten or so who are still with the same lady and, like I tell young kids, "It's not easy. You've got to pick your battles--pick your battles, so [that] you can win the war. Winning the war means staying together, and you're going to lose some battles." [laughter] I tell a lot of the young kids, "It's a huge compromise, man," and I said, "If you're not willing to start out at fifty-fifty, it's not likely it's going to work," because most men, they see it as seventy-five their favor, twenty-five for the lady. That's just the way they were raised, but I told them, I said, "No, not in today's world, man. It's a fifty-fifty partnership," and that's the way Madeleine and I have lived. Whoever had the salaried position would have to keep it if the other was in a self-employed position. So, we would alternate taking gambles [owning businesses]. When I was with the government, she was a legal secretary then, for the managing partner of Cadwalader, Wickersham & Taft's office here in DC. She learned a whole lot about Washington through him. Then, I took the gamble, because she was a legal secretary, then, I went into real estate. Then, I got that going real well, and then, she started her own permanent placement legal secretarial firm. She was very successful at that, and then, the computer came along and she noticed that her clients--she had all the major law firms downtown, not temps, she only did permanent [legal support positions]--and so, the office managers would order a secretary for two lawyers, and then, a secretary for three lawyers. What was happening is that the computer was coming online and the attorneys were doing their own typing. So, Madeleine, it just so happened this was the time Madeleine conceived and all, was having a child, and she took Phillips to the office with her until Phillips got out of the pram. So, then, we shared child-keeping responsibilities then, but we always alternated in gambling. A lot of friends of mine said, "Man, my wife would never tolerate that," or the husband would say, "No, I wouldn't let my wife work in some self-employed position," because most people want a steady check coming or steady two checks coming in all the time, but Madeleine and I never [did]. We're not wired like that. So, we did our own [thing]. We've stayed together by working as a team like that, cooperating, fifty-fifty partnership. So, it's real, real good--so far. [laughter]

SI: Is there anything else that you would like to add to the record?

BM: I think that's it. I think I've talked too much.

SI: No, I think it went very well. I just want to ask one last question. One of the reasons that we got in touch was because of the "Black on the Banks" conference that you attended last November. Do you have any thoughts on the conference?

BM: Yes. I thought, number one, I was totally surprised, pleasantly surprised, when I found out that Doug Greenberg had really probably recognized and was the catalyst for placing in the archives of Rutgers history the contribution and the experiences of black students in the '60s and early '70s. Well, I had no idea what to expect. The folks who had graduated, say, five or six years prior to myself, I didn't know and to learn of their experiences was another instance in my life where I was lucky enough to learn, still, what contributed to my being [there], and those who went before us clearly did that. What was amazing, too, is that the one common thought was that everyone, all of the black students, former students, who had come, the alumni who came back, they all clearly recognized that Paul Robeson was our founding father, especially since, as you and I were talking at lunch about public history, he was pretty much [ignored for a long time], because there's a lot of debate going on, whether it was because he was black or whether it was because he was a Communist. The thing the people failed to forget is his contributions and all and his affiliation with Communism had to be seen in the context of life for a black man in his era. Face it, the Communist Party was professing equality of men, equality of laws and all and, at that point, when this country was heavily segregated, this was really one of his only ways toward relief from that. Through, I think, "Black on the Banks," all of us, especially, now, I graduated in '69, but the movement toward recognizing Paul Robeson and asking for an African-American Studies Department and all that, that started when I was getting ready to leave, and so, I got a chance to hear the protests, the meetings with the deans, president of Rutgers and all, to voice these concerns about the recognition of black contributors to Rutgers history, because the alumni who--and when I say the alumni who graduated before my class and all, I'm including pre-merger times, when Douglass was an independent sister school of Rutgers, the all-boys

school--they had experiences which really were a learning experience for me, because they felt isolated, lonely, felt a need to really stay in close contact with each other while they were attending Rutgers and Douglass. Of course, everybody, these are all good students, I mean, to get into the school at that time and all. They were all good students, even the athletes. [laughter] Even the athletes got Rutgers degrees. So, it was a different era. Sports wasn't as big [a] money issue as now, but the psychological effects on the blacks who came before me, it seems like it was a lot less enjoyable experience than I had. I really felt sad for them, that they weren't able [to enjoy it as much], that they had to endure feeling like that, because my coming from a predominantly white Quaker boarding school, north of Philadelphia, Solebury School, and then, coming to Rutgers and being an athlete--and the panel that I was on at Black on the Banks were athletes--it was clearly evident to me that our experiences at Rutgers were not as unhappy as those who preceded us. Then, we talked about that after the panel and we realized that, being athletes, we were more socially attached to white students anyway, [laughter] because, when you play on a team together for all the years we had played sports, on various integrated teams and all, you got to learn that we all have similar feelings and love similar things and hate similar things. So, I don't think any of us were lonely coming to Rutgers. Even though, in my class, there were only fourteen blacks in my class, I don't think any of us felt lonely. I guess because of teamwork and all in our systems with whites and all, we were more at ease. It was not a new relationship to us and, consequently, I think we came across way more self-assured in our attendance at Rutgers than those who didn't, who came before us. Now, after us, the tenor of the panels became a lot more militant and, I don't know, this is just--what they were trying to portray, I think, is what they went through getting these changes and promoting more inclusiveness to the hierarchy of Rutgers, especially to the administrators and faculty. So, the voice levels and all became very emotional when these guys were living back in that day, reflecting that experience in that day and remembering some of the hurtful moments at that time at Rutgers. None of these guys were athletes, but they were all good students. Like I said, everybody there, they were all good students and it's surprising, because even my buddies--we were in the '60s era, everybody's doing recreational drugs and things like that and partying and stuff--we all were, like, dean's list students. It's a difference between today's--today's students use drugs as an escape from reality. We did it to escape from academic discipline, to party for a weekend, and then, on Monday morning, we'd be right in class and doing well in class for the

rest of the week, and then, on Saturday night or Friday night; now, given me, I wouldn't be doing any of that during the season, [laughter] but it was just a whole different psychology. At Black on the Banks, I was shocked at how well everyone had turned out. Everyone was a professional now. I mean, the education wasn't in vain. Everyone was a doctor, a lawyer, tons of lawyers, teachers, professors. I mean, everyone was a major contributor and community involved, involved in the communities where they lived. Of course, they were all, predominantly, I bet at least sixty percent of them, I bet, are still New Jerseyans, still developed their careers in their state, and we would expect that. It's the State University, just like the University of Virginia is down here in Virginia. A lot of the folks who are community involved are University of Virginia grads and all, professionals and all, but I was really surprised of my '60s era blacks who have just [really succeeded]. Everybody's a major contributor to society and that was very, very rewarding. I wonder if the school--see, I think the whole educational [system], I don't know education now, in our day, Rutgers was an ivory tower. It was a place where you were given more freedoms of thought and everything than you were in general society. Now, schools are starting to even talk about censoring free speech and things like that. I feel very fortunate, again, that I came through in an era where, and especially at Rutgers, we had Gene Genovese, who was one of the most noted historians in this country, stirring up things from a leftist point of view and all. [Editor's Note: On April 23, 1965, at a teach-in at Rutgers University's Scott Hall, professor of history Eugene D. Genovese declared, "...I do not fear or regret the impending Viet Cong victory in Vietnam. I welcome it." A firestorm of controversy ensued and became a focal point in the 1965 New Jersey gubernatorial race, but Rutgers University President Mason W. Gross, with the support of the faculty, resisted public pressure to dismiss Genovese, on the principle of academic freedom.] All of that was welcome discourse at Rutgers back then. We ought to be given a little recess from standard life responsibilities and all for your four years of studying for intellectual discourse, and we got that there. My sister, who's a professor at Rutgers now, she tells me, over and over, "Bryant, the athletic issues at Rutgers now, please don't let those weigh on you in thinking about Rutgers, because," she said, "today, we still have a very, very good faculty and we have a lot of very dedicated professors." She said, "Now, the children who come in here may not be getting as high an education as forty, fifty years ago in the New Jersey school system," she said, "but we have to work with that. Professors have to understand that and work with that," but she said, "Just remember, academically, don't think your school's going down the

tubes," [laughter] and she says, "and don't think that the faculty's not aware, because," she says, "we are at loggerheads with the administration a lot, too." She said, "[Our academic quality is] not published like when the AD, athletic director, is fired and stuff like that," she said, "but, no, we are fully aware. We're trying to keep our standards of teaching as high as we can," and she said, "Because we are a state university, we aren't the only ones going through this problem, because the legislators just want to look at budgets and we want to educate the students of New Jersey," but Black on the Banks, I think--I hate to give Doug too much credit and stuff--but he started it, he spearheaded it and he finished it and I thought he did a very noble and excellent job. So, we won't be forgotten at Rutgers 250th anniversary--so, go Scarlet Knights.

SI: A good way to end. Thank you very much. I appreciate all of your time over the two sessions.

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Reviewed by Shaun Illingworth 9/16/2016

Reviewed by Bryant Mitchell 9/17/2016