

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH TAN "JOE" NGUYEN

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Nicholas Trajano Molnar: This begins the second interview with Tan Nguyen in New Brunswick, New Jersey on February 17th, 2012. Thanks Tan for coming back in, and we are just going to pick up where we left off last time. I believe we left off with kind of middle school and high school period. So, could you just start out by giving us a little background about the transition to high school?

Tan Nguyen: Okay, well, I went to Edison High School and graduated in 1988, but growing up in Edison and going to the school there, it was still I don't want to say like difficult, but I always had that sense of being the outcast and going through the school, just trying to blend into everyone was a task in itself, but I learned to live with it, I learned to kind of like go with the flow as they say, but what really got my interest was a program, it was called the Marine Youth Corps. It was a former gunnery sergeant that was giving this I would say course or class, and it's for anybody who had interest in military, and I found out through a friend in ninth grade that they were running this program, so I signed up and learned firsthand experience from this former gunnery sergeant, his experience in Vietnam. That in itself drew more interests on my part, because obviously it's from where I came from, and this was my first real opportunity to actually get a firsthand knowledge in his experiences of what it was like to him to serve in Vietnam, because I always feel like I don't know, everyone was looking at me when they find out where I came from, but to meet him at first was actually a little nerve wracking, but then once I got to know him, once he told his stories and experiences. It was a little bit more at ease knowing that he really put his heart and his efforts into the war for the better of this country, and he often emphasized about how they didn't get a fair shake or a warm welcome when they came home, and he was still kind of bitter about the whole thing. He never talked about it in detail, but I got a sense that he was still holding it, and it was still in the back of his mind regarding the way that his country treated him when he came back. I can understand because later on when I joined the Marine Corps, and when we came back from Desert Storm, we had a very heartfelt welcome, parades etc. and to know that they weren't afforded the same opportunity to me wasn't right, you know, because someone goes over there and puts their life on the line, and no war is ever like fought perfectly or no war is ever good, but whatever the outcome, you have to live with it, and you have to support all those that went over there voluntarily or even drafted, and they give their hundred percent, and to come home, and I guess to have the treatment that he described was kind of sad in itself, but I signed up for the program, and I got to learn what it was like to be in the military. We start out with just like drills and marches and just history of the Marine Corps, and through time, I definitely found that this was something that I wanted to do, and I always had it in the back of my head, even before I stand up in front of the class, how this country, how it treated us, my family and the opportunity that they gave us when we came to this country and part of me always wanted to thank them for their efforts, not only the veterans, but the country in itself and part of me just realized that, you know, what, if when I do graduate, I'm going to enlist in the Marine Corps, not only just for me, but as a way to say thank you to the country that provided our family with the opportunity to live here in freedom and just like I said, just to feel like part of this country also. That was one of the main reasons. So, going to high school, just like any other ordinary kid, I guess, but what separated me from most kids was joining this Marine Youth Corps with my friends and knowing that sooner or later I was going to enlist into the real deal, I guess. So, before I go into that, is there anything you want to know.

NM: Yes, I just want to follow up, so were you in this Marine Youth Corps for all four years?

TN: No, it was only for two years, ninth grade, I believe this ended in tenth grade, somewhere around tenth grade.

NM: Was this a year-long program?

TN: At first it was like we would meet on weekends, and then, in the summer, we would go on like bivouacs or camp, and we would drill, and that was the extent of it, and we'd also got to meet friends of the drill sergeant, his friends that were also in Vietnam, and they shared their stories, but it kind of went to about I believe the summer of my sophomore year.

NM: Was this a program that the gunnery sergeant, he developed this by himself or was it part of a larger Marine Youth Corps organization?

TN: Let me just say his name is Gunnery Sergeant (Jim Connolly?), I forgot to mention his name. This was something that he started himself, I believe. It was something that he started himself that my friends told me about, and this was on his own time, and we just like took interests to it, and he just, you know, taught us the ways in military about respect, honor, courage and discipline, the basic stuff that you need to know prior to actually joining the military itself. If any of us like me had any interest of joining the Marines, this was a great way of giving you a head start rather than go into the Marine Corps without any knowledge of knowing what's going on. I already knew all the basics about it, and that made it a lot easier for me later on when I enlisted.

NM: So, the other youth in the program, how many were there, were they all from Edison?

TN: Yes, they're all from Edison; they're my classmates. I think at one point there was a total of maybe about twenty, twenty-five. Some would obviously quit or some would not go to the weekend drill meetings, that through the time I guess there was at least ten of us that were committed, and we were like say the diehards, I guess, the ones that would always go to every meet, and later on actually we all enlisted and went on our separate ways, but overall, I believe there was twenty-five at the most and ...

NM: You had mentioned in the first interview that your parents did not want you to join the Boy Scouts because they feared it was a military group. When you joined this military organization, what were their reactions?

TN: When you mentioned about the Boy Scouts, now I recall, but when I joined this program, again I wasn't say eight or nine years old I believe when I approached them about the Boy Scout issue. Now, I was in tenth grade, teenager knowing a little bit about what he wants to do, and this project was a little different. I told my parents about it, and I told them that this was something I want to do, and now that I was a little older, I can talk a little better, and they did not approve of it. They were taking the position that why would you subject yourself to an organization that would involve violence and fighting and stuff, which we try to escape from Vietnam. So, I guess what they were trying to say is, "Why would you subject yourself to put yourself in that same predicament, that we worked so hard to try to get away?," but they didn't

speaking English that well so it was hard to like communicate as far as like terminology and definitions of the program, but they kind of had it in their mind that they didn't approve of this. With that, I still continued to go to the drills and the meets and even without their consent so.

NM: Now did any of your brothers participate in any activities like this?

TN: No, no, it was just me, yes, just me. I'm the youngest of the boys, I mean all the brothers had their sights on colleges and just my oldest brother like I said, he dropped out of high school, he just worked, and my other two brothers, one went to I think to Citone Institute, the other one went to Middlesex County College after high school.

NM: Was that something that you were considering as well?

TN: Yes, and no being that my brother's, well my two brothers, one went to college, and I believe he dropped out after the second semester, and my other brother he went to Citone Institute, and the thing was that my parents didn't have the means to pay for any of these, and that was one of the reasons why they had dropped out too because of financial reasons, but I knew for some reason I was not going to be given the same opportunity. I didn't have the money to pay, my parents definitely didn't have money to pay for it, and I just saw that this probably be the best opportunity for me just to enlist in the Marine Corps rather than go to college because this is something that I had interest in for starters, and this is something that I could do on my own without the assistance from my parents, because they didn't have the financial means.

NM: Now when you were in high school, did you participate in any other activities, extracurricular, sports or clubs or anything of that sort?

TN: No, not really just like I said just the Marine Youth Corps was the first two years, and that was it, didn't participate in any sports. I mean, I played sports and stuff, but I wasn't like with the school.

NM: Academically, what subjects did you enjoy? You said you enjoyed gym.

TN: Yes, and I still enjoy gym class in high school, I guess, because I was physically fit, just came easy to me, and it was just more fun. Part of it also was like academically I was probably, looking back, I was just average C student, nothing great, and it was just like easier, I don't know, I guess when I say gym class because of my abilities not and academically, I'll be honest to say I wasn't that, I didn't stand out, and I was just an average student. Now, you've got to keep in mind too, my family growing up in just a fishing village, my education level I believe at the time was kindergarten when I left. The education back in Vietnam was in no way near what it was here so for us to just jump into something far more advanced was difficult in itself, so I'd say I just got by.

NM: How well did you get along with the other students? Were the other Vietnamese immigrants there or did you hang out with your friends in the neighborhood?

TN: Definitely not. In 1975, like I said, when we moved to Edison, we were the only ones in that area. From what I recall I don't believe I met another Vietnamese student throughout my school years, possibly maybe I heard of one in high school, but not actually got to meet, you know, talk to during my school years.

NM: One more thing before we move on, you said the one teacher in elementary school had some preconceptions about you being from Vietnam and did you encounter any of that in high school?

TN: Oh, you're talking about Ms. Phifer when I was sleeping in school, and well, no, in high school it wasn't the same, because now we're talking in the middle to late '80s, and kids have more knowledge than they did obviously in first grade, and now that the Vietnam War just like ten years passed, so just like any other event, as time goes by, you tend to forget about it. It wasn't like fresh as it was in 1975 when I came over where it was still fresh in everybody's minds, but in high school I didn't experience the same situations.

NM: So, the Marine Youth Corps program you said it kind of ends in tenth grade. So, eleventh and twelfth grades, I guess, could you tell us about the practice of graduating and choosing the Marines?

TN: Like I say, after tenth grade, I kind of knew right then in my mind that that's the direction I wanted to go, and eleventh grade was just another year for me, a year that's closer for me to have the ability to enlist, and the same thing goes for twelfth grade where I was more adamant knowing I was definitely closer to do something I wanted to do, and then, of course, it was actually written in my yearbook about joining the Marine Corps like a little message in there, but eleventh grade, twelfth grade that's what I was thinking about was just the opportunity I could enlist.

NM: So, did you go back to, I forgot the name of the gunnery sergeant.

TN: (Connolly)?

NM: Yes, did you go back to him and tell him you were going to join? Did he help you enlist?

TN: Yes, he prepped us, you know, he gave us all the basics about it, and like I said, when the program ended in the summer of my sophomore year, I did tell them that I'm interested to enlist, he kind of gave me the nod, and he said that, "I knew you would. You were always one of my favorites. I knew you have what it takes," and we stayed in touch. We wrote a couple of letters back and forth later on when I was overseas, but he was definitely proud of me and believe it or not out of all of us, I was the only one that joined the Marine Corps meaning like my friends that were also in the program, because one joined the Army, one joined the Navy, one joined the Air Force, so the die-hard clique, the ones I was referring to before, at the end of it all we left on our separate ways as far as the different military branch of service, but I was the only one that joined the Marine Corps.

NM: Did any of those people who joined, did they end up making a career of it?

TN: No, from what I gathered, we've all just did our four years active service, and no, I take that back, Sean, he joined the Air Force, he stayed for quite a bit. I think he stayed for like twelve years. Well, he did four years active, and the other years he did reserves; he was in the reserves where the rest of us we just did our four years active duty service, and then, got out.

NM: So, I know why you chose the Marines, but now you were actually joined the military, so what was your father's reaction to this?

TN: Not too good. At first they actually didn't believe me. It was my senior year, and I had gone to the recruiting station in Edison. ... My gunnery sergeant, he told me, "When you go to join, when you enlist, make sure that you have in writing what it is that you wanted to do." So, the funny story was, while in high school by the way, I was working construction, that was my job like weekends just doing construction, and I just said to myself like, well I'm like swing a hammer, digging a ditch with a shovel, and on these jobs, I can see other guys working heavy equipment whether it be the backhoe or bulldozer, whatever and they're making top dollar and the machine is doing all the effort where I'm like using a lot of, I don't know, exerting a lot of physical energy, so I said, "You know, maybe I'll join the Marine Corps and be like a heavy equipment operator, they'll teach me the skills, that way when I get out, I'll be certified as they say, and I could be the guy behind the bulldozer, backhoe, etc. and getting the big bucks and not really have to sweat it out." So, that was my intention originally to go in the Marine Corps to be a heavy equipment operator or now they refer to it as an engineer, but the gunnery sergeant (Connolly?) said, "Make sure you have that in writing." So, that day when I went to the recruiting station in Edison, walked to the office, and I was on my own, and as I went to the recruiting station, I'm sitting around, and I couldn't believe it the whole time. I thought, "I can't believe I'm doing this, I can't believe I'm doing this." This is a big step for me because I'm in high school, just about to graduate, and now, I'm getting into something I know a little bit about, but still, it's a big step. I'm going to be on my own, I'm going to be out there and away from home, etc. So, all this is flashing through my mind, but going back to the recruiting station, I go in there, and I'm looking around the office, and I see all these great posters of Marines, camouflage weapons and all the gear they're wearing and everything, so I asked, I believe he was a staff sergeant at the recruiting station, I asked him, I said, ... pointing to the posters, "What about that?" meaning what about that field, and he told, he said, "Well, that's special, if that's what you want." I said, "Well, is there any openings?" He made some phone calls, and by the way, I was referred to the Marine Corps infantry, because what the posters were of infantry soldiers, weapons and gear and all of that good stuff, and he made some phone calls, and he says, "There is, but it would be an eight month wait." It's called a delayed action program. So, I said, "You know what? I think I'll change my mind. I don't want to be equipment operator. I want to be infantry," because to me, and again, this is my own preference, it just seemed like when I was training with the gunnery sergeant and everything, he always kind of instilled in my brain that like the Marines were the fighting unit, they were like the first in, last ones out type of thing and that gave me a little bit pride about the Marine Corps, and it still shows to this day, by the way, but going back to the recruiting station, there was availability for enlistment for that field, and there was eight month waiting list or the delayed entry program, so again, I said to the staff officer, "Can I get that in writing?" Sure enough it was provided, I took the test, the entry test to get in, and that's it. He gave me my date where I was going to go to get my physical and exams,

and it was off to South Carolina, Parris Island. So, here we are the summer of, graduated in '88, it was '89, yes, so I wait eight months from the date of my graduation, 1988. So, I come home, and I tell my parents. So, I said, you know, "Mom, Dad, just so you know, I joined the Marine Corps," and I didn't even know how to translate Marine Corps; I just said military, right, and they didn't believe me first of all. They're like, "Oh, you're too little," little meant like size, because back in high school I was like a hundred and fifty pounds, and was the smallest boy in the family, of course, but I said, "No, I really did join, and I'm going to be leaving in December 10th of 1988," and again, they weren't convinced for some reason, but knowing that I know I'm joining, and I had eight months left, of course, I had a girlfriend at the time, and I told her, and, you know, I can't recall if she was supportive or not; it just the fact that we're going to be separated, I guess, and I'm going to a whole new environment, and I don't know, did you want me to get to the part of enlistment or did you want me ...

NM: Just continue.

TN: That whole summer I guess I was just having fun, hanging out with my friends, partying, I guess and just counting down to the day, and all the time I just couldn't think, I couldn't help, but think like, "What's going to happen? How is it going to play into this?" and I can't help, but also bring out the fact like, "Hey, I'm Vietnamese. I'm going into the military, the American military, and how would they treat me, how would I be looked at, etc.," the whole nerve wracking, because it's just not like anybody joining, it's me; it's me from Vietnam joining, so that in and of itself is nerve wracking, but with persistence I just stayed the course, and as the days got closer, I finally said to myself, you know, this is definitely what I'm going to do and reverting back to what I said before, part of it was to say like this is me giving back to the country that gave our family an opportunity and all the efforts that the veterans had made, but when you think something like that, in my mind to say I'm going to join to give back to the country, it's not something that I go and advertise to everybody. .. I never said it to my friends; I never said, "Hey, I'm going to join to give back to this country." It's just something that you keep inside yourself for your own satisfaction that when it's done you know that you did it, but like I said, it's not something that I went around bragging about it or anything like that. To this day, as a matter-of-fact, in this interview, it's actually when it's brought out, about my feelings towards why I've enlisted, but I did mention that to my parents later on not the day that I left, but that was one of the reasons why, so now it's December 10th, and the recruiter was coming to pick me up at four in the morning, and I said all my goodbyes to all my friends and brothers and sisters and still my parents weren't convinced, so sure enough the knock came at four in the morning and all I had on was a jacket, shirt, pair of jeans, sneakers and a wallet. That's all that was expected for me to have, and I was just waiting in the living room. I don't believe I even slept that night, and the recruiter knocked on the door, introduced himself, and I turned to my mom and dad, because they were up, and I told them, like, "This is it, you know, I'm leaving now," and that's when they just had the shock and awe look; they're looking like, "You really are leaving?" because once they saw the recruiter they knew it was the real deal. So, my mom cried, she just, you know, she hugged me, and then, my dad, he was always to himself, but he kind of came out of the shell this time when I left, and I can't recall totally what he said. ... It was very brief, but he pretty much said to take care of myself, and he said, "Just be careful." Now, keep in mind, during this time frame of 1989, that summer there was nothing going on as far as conflicts going on, and that's what I did too reassure Mom, to say like, "Hey, listen Mom. ... I'm just joining, this way I

could do something with my life," and I said, "Don't worry. There's nothing going on; no wars are being fought right now, and there hasn't been for a while," just to give her a little comfort. So, then that's it. I said my goodbye, I got picked up, and I was driven to (Meps?) in Newark, which is like where you're going to go get your physical, and you get processed; I get sworn in to go, to enlist in the military, and that whole process was very nerve wracking. I'm driving with the recruiter, here I am away from my element and just going into a place of unknown, I guess, and I go there, and there were other people that are joining also, but I'm looking around, and I don't see too many Asians, let alone Vietnamese, so I still feel like an outcast, but I mean, I keep things to myself, and I'm just going with the flow, so I go through the process, I get my physical, and I get my final swearing in. The group, I believe, I'm going to say there were maybe about eighty-two hundred people there. They just called out each group like, "Okay, all those that are going to join the Army, you know, stand up and walk over to this area," and majority of them did, Navy and then, Air Force, and then, they said, "All those joining the Marines." I think there was maybe like twelve of us, and at that moment, when I stood up again not to put down any other branch of service, but I felt proud to stand up when they said, "All Marines, anyone that will join the Marines," and I stood up, and I even actually heard some comments made from the other guys from the other branches. They said, "You guys are crazy," and that comment was heard, I remember that I said to myself, "Why did he say that?" I'm thinking, "What's that all about?," but I felt proud anyway, and then, we stood up, and we went to our area, and we got processed more, and then, we were given our orders, and that night, we were staying in a hotel, and the next morning we were to be out front, seven o'clock, get picked up by the bus to be taken to the airport. Now keep in mind, prior to this day, the night before, I didn't sleep, because everything is just going through my mind, and expecting the recruiter picking me up at four, so I didn't sleep at all that night, and here the next day, and now, we're staying in a hotel that night to be picked up tomorrow at seven in the morning, and again, I did not sleep. Not only that, because they put me in a room by myself, and there was no alarm clock, anything like that, and I didn't want to be late, and the whole night, I was just going through my mind, "What's going to happen? Why did I do this? What is my future like? Why did I do this?" this just keeps going back and forth, and I was just thinking all my friends are like hanging out having fun, and here I am to make this move and all that stuff goes through your head, usually a young kid, when you're eighteen years old, and then, of course, the girlfriend left her too; that was pretty tough, and again, the whole night, I just stayed awake just watching TV, and now it's seven in the morning, go out front, get picked up by the bus, driven to Newark Airport, and I said to myself, "I'll catch some sleep on the plane." I forgot how many hours the flight it was; there was a layover Atlanta too, so we just flew to Atlanta, Georgia, and we got off the plane there, oh by the way, I didn't sleep on the plane, couldn't sleep, too nervous, and the reason why I'm saying this is to give you an idea of how long I've been awake now; it's almost two days without any sleep. So, we go to Atlanta, Georgia, and we just file off the plane, and there is a Marine waiting, an actual Marine, a real Marine there at the airport just like anything you heard about the Marines yelling at you, screaming at you etc., this and that, so I was waiting for this, but he didn't, and I was thinking, "When is the yelling part going to come?," but again, they just, in a firm voice, told us to go into this room, and we just sat there and waited for our connecting flight, and then, got on another plane, and then, landed in, I think it was (Beaufort?), South Carolina, and there, another real Marine. Again, these guys looked sharp. They're in full uniform, and here I am long hair like down to shoulder length, just wearing a jean jacket, and I'm not looking anywhere like a Marine at all, and they just gave us directions to follow them to the bus, and this is that

famous bus ride that we all know about in the Marine Corps, it's when you get to Parris Island you get all the yellow footprints that they had painted on the tarmac or the asphalt. So, now this is the bus ride to Parris Island, and it was unlike any bus ride I have ever been on at all, obviously. It was total silence. I believe everyone was just feeling the same way I was, like what's going to happen, what did I get into, this is a life changing experience, my families and everybody left behind, you go into a world, an environment of unknown etc., and the main thing is what to expect. That's probably one of the things that kept on going through my mind, and I think it was a three hour bus ride, but it wasn't just a regular bus ride because the bus driver was giving us history about Parris Island, but not in a positive way; it was more like in a different way. I don't know how to describe it, but I'll just ... tell it like he said. As we were driving through the, oh by the way, it was like one in the morning, I believe, midnight or one in the morning when we got on the bus, so it was very dark, and he was telling us how there's no way to get off the base; it's swamp, surrounded by swamps; there's only one bridge in, one bridge out. There's alligators in the swamp. I was saying to myself, "Why is he telling us all this?" He's trying to obviously instill fear in us, and he just says how like, "You better listen. You've got to move fast." I was thinking, "This is the bus driver," a civilian bus driver, so I'm saying to myself, "What am I getting into?" So, what he said gave me a heads up basically what to expect, but I definitely wasn't going to go through the swamp or anything like that and get bit by the alligators, good tip. So, bus stops at the front gate, and of course, you see the entrance sign, this "Welcome to Parris Island, Marine Corps Recruit Depot," in scarlet and gold, the ones that I've always seen from training with the Marine Youth Corps and everything. I can't believe here I am.

[Tape Paused]

NM: Okay, so just please continue.

TN: So, I think I left off with the bus pulling up to the front gate of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, and a Marine came on the bus, and they started in a louder voice; he extended us a welcome to Marine Corps Depot Recruitment, and now I'm thinking, this is it. This is no turning back for sure and proceeded to the receiving center, and another Marine came on the bus, very politely, he said, "At this time, I'd like all the females to please exit the bus," and proceed to whatever area that he had pointed to. So, far, it's not too bad. Then, sure enough after the females left the bus, they just started screaming, "Get off the bus," a lot of profanity, and trust me, it just woke me right up, and then, he says, "Get off the bus, and find yourself footprints," basically he was trying to say is the yellow footprints on the ground there, and we stood there at attention while they just started yelling, demanding, and what to expect of us etc., and how we're no longer who we are, and I remember it was cold that night. This was December, but in South Carolina, it's not as cold as up here, and I hadn't slept in over two days; "Stand at attention," just wondering what did I get into at this point. I mean, you can talk all you want before you actually do it and kind of get an idea of what you think you want to do, but until it happens, that's when your whole perspective changes where it was not all what you thought it would be. I'm not saying it was bad; I'm just saying you never know unless you're there. You can talk about it all you want, but here it is; this is it. It's probably now like three in the morning, and we just got our uniforms, got our gear, did more paper work, and then, sure enough, the sun came up and went to breakfast, and the whole time I'm so tired, and I'm so tired because I hadn't gotten sleep, and I've

still got to do what's expected, we just got issued to a platoon, and it wasn't until that night that we were able to get some sleep. . . . I think it was like ten o'clock, and man did I sleep; it was almost three days of being up. I don't know if that means anything to you, but when you're up that long, and being in the situation that you're in, that's a lot that goes through your mind, not only that you're just fighting sleep, but you're also dealing with the environment that you're in. That's probably one of the toughest things mentally and physically that I have done in my life up to that point, and the whole time I just couldn't believe I'm here, couldn't believe I'm doing this, but part of me is proud of the fact that I am here, and I'm doing this, because this is not something that everybody does, let alone everybody can accomplish just because you're in boot camp doesn't mean you made it. You still have to pass boot camp, and it's three months long, and the Marine Corps has the reputation of having the most vigorous, difficult, physically challenging boot camp of all the armed forces. I believe its three months long, and the other branch of services only have like six to eight weeks, some of them are less, etc. So, I knew I had a tough road ahead. Again, I knew just being in boot camp doesn't mean that you made it, because to earn that title you still have to complete boot camp.

NM: I would like to ask about the transition from civilian to military life. Could speak about that? I know that your Marine Youth Corps training had probably prepared you. Before you enlisted, did you prepare any way physically or mentally?

TN: Yes, definitely. Marine Corps we drill a lot, march a lot, a lot of exercise, a lot of running, gunnery sergeant always emphasized running, getting in shape, and he was right, because prior to me joining, I ran a lot, did a lot of pushups, a lot of sit ups, and I like how to march, so that was definitely a bonus when I enlisted, because one of the things that boot camp is designed to do is to weed out the weak, as they say, but all that preparation from the Marine Youth Corps definitely helped me out a lot when I enlisted or when I went to boot camp, and to be physically in shape is definitely what it took at boot camp to get it through, because you don't want to be the last guy running, you don't want to be the one who falls out on runs or be the last guy to do anything. I was told that if they don't know your name, that's a good thing, because if they know your name that means you probably screwed up, and they're going to be on you all the time. So, I was told that if they ask you to do something, do it quick, do it right, and that's exactly what I did.

NM: So, tell us about going through basic training. Can you tell us about some of your experiences and the process of taking you as a civilian and making you cut your hair and making you into a Marine?

TN: Yes, the cutting hair part, how could I forget? So, I think it was like the second day. Keep in mind, I had long shoulder length hair, and we got a haircut; it was so quick too. The buzzers they used, I think it took like a minute about for each person for them to shave your hair off completely, and when that happened, I was just like, "Oh, my gosh, this is crazy." I was actually even nervous to look into the mirror, actually like crept up on the mirror just to see what I looked like, and it wasn't pretty, you know. I never had my haircut, all off like that, but again, still everybody else had their haircut, so it wasn't like I was the only one, but that transition was difficult. It was definitely a mind blowing experience, never experienced anything like that, and I can still remember it vividly to this day, because it's something that you just don't forget. Like I

said before, it was the toughest, physically and emotionally, thing I'd ever done in my life up to that point, and that whole transition of going from civilian life to military life is now in its initial stages, and it is definitely difficult to adjust to, but you managed to get through it, and what it took for me was I look around, and I believe there was like seventy some recruits in my platoon, and we don't even get to talk to each other. That's how strict they are, and in the beginning, you don't talk to each other, you don't say anything, you get caught talking, you're going to be punished by making you do exercise, and I looked around, and I just noticed that there were other recruits from all parts of the country including myself coming down from Jersey, and here's another guy from down south, Florida, or up north etc. By the way, everybody who lives on the east, I believe east of the Mississippi goes to Parris Island; everybody that lives west of the Mississippi goes to West Coast, Camp Pendleton, I don't know if that's the boot camp that they call over there. So, just seeing all the recruits around me from the different parts of the country made it a little easier, not only like, "Hey, they probably feel just the same way I do," and that whole transition, in the whole course of three months, they have different phases in boot camp training, phase one, two and three. The first one, they pretty much break you down, get rid of any bad habits that you have, and they mold you the way they want you to be, so that was the most difficult is the first phase, because you're getting yelled at, you're getting punished if you do something wrong, and also, they do this to weed out the weak, because at the end we graduated with only like fifty something recruits, drop like twenty recruits that didn't make it, and then, I remember the first qualification, now, there's qualifications that you have to do at boot camp in order to stay, and the first one was the swimming qualification. That's where you're in utility uniform with your boots on, and you just jump into a pool, Olympic size pool, and for five minutes with your boots on and your fatigues, you have to stay afloat anyway you can for five minutes; that's the first portion of the test, swim qualification, and let me tell, it was difficult to swim with your boots on and your uniform on and with that test, we lost ... about fifteen recruits, and this was only about two weeks into boot camp where we had this first test, the swim qual. So, if you couldn't swim, they say, "You're out." They send you home, so I felt so bad for those guys that had to leave, because I'm thinking to myself how difficult it was, and the challenges that it took to get here, to make your family proud and your friends proud, and here they are two weeks, and they're heading back home. I can only imagine what they were going through, but you move on. You continue the course. The second portion of the qualification is your marksmanship ability, and you're on a rifle range. If you don't score the minimum marksmanship, I can't recall the actual point system, but if you can't qualify with the rifle, you're sent home also, because they want you to be able to shoot. Well, like I said, the first phase was the most difficult, and that was a lot of yelling and a lot of getting in shape, a lot of weeding out the weak, and the second phase was a little bit more at ease where you're on the rifle range where you're learning history of the Marine Corps, you're learning tradition, they starting to really give you what the Marine Corps is all about, the second phase, and you start to feel proud, you start to feel a little more proud of each day knowing the history of the Marine Corps, the battles they fought, just overall you feel like, hey, you're starting to belong as part of an elite unit that has such a long history, and then, you go into the third phase which is like the last month of your training, and there, they treat you more like you're a human being, but the instructors, they actually talk to you, you're no longer like robots or treat you like one unit, but they actually get down to your level, and it's a good feeling knowing, "Hey, these aren't the monsters that you met since the first day, that they actually do have feelings, and they do have humor and etc.," and then, you start to feel proud. You're in the best shape of your life, physically, and, you know,

you're looking forward to graduation, your family coming down to see you in the parade, march on that parade deck, and that's all I was thinking about. It was like, "Oh, my gosh, I'm going to make it." Like I said, this is not something for everybody, I mean, only a few can do something like this, and that day came, and we were marching on the parade deck, and it just so happens too that I was the marching out front of my whole company, me and the company commander. I was holding the company flag so I was way in front of the whole like, I don't know, a hundred fifty Marines, and it felt pretty good that I was what they call the (series guide?), which is like, it's a privilege position when you're first I was ... head of the class, our class leader where you carry the flag that represents your platoon, and then, you have your squad leaders, and you make your way up, and then, somehow I was elected to be the company guide or company leader, I guess, and you're marching out there, and you go through the whole process and guest speakers and everything, and the whole time, you're just standing at parade rest, and you're looking into a crowd, and you actually see your family and other recruits' family, something that you just totally weren't exposed to when you were in boot camp, because you're in a whole different world. Then, after they said those magic words, "Congratulations, you know, company dismissed," it was just the proudest moment that I ever felt in my life knowing that I went through something that was so difficult, something I wanted to do so bad, and then, I've accomplished it, and then, to see my brother, my friends, my girlfriend, and I was in uniform, it was definitely something I can still remember to this day, and it was a great feeling, like I said, to have accomplished something so difficult, and at the same time, now that I've graduated and became a Marine, back to what I was saying before, about not feeling like part of the crowd because of where I came from in Vietnam etc. I was a little bit more at ease now, because I was no longer just that Vietnamese kid or guy. I was actually the Vietnamese guy that is now a Marine who is going to serve his new country, and no one can take that from me, and I've always had that, I said, growing up, when I was little, I was always shy, because of my background, because we were always thought of as the enemy, right, so, but now, being who I am and what I've accomplished and who I represent as a Marine and knowing that, "Hey, you're serving your country, and you've earned the title," I felt a little bit more at ease, that if anyone should ever challenge me regarding my ethnic background etc., I'll just let him know look, what I'm doing. So, it would be so confrontational, knowing that I now have the upper hand, just fast forwarding a little bit. When I got out of the Marine Corps, just going back home and everything like that, and when I got this job where I am in now, I can't recall totally, but a subject came up where someone made a comment stating that again it's still to this day that my ethnic background still it comes up, whether it be comments or jokes or whatever, and someone, one of my co-workers, made a comment regarding like my being a foreigner or something like that or not being American or something like that, because I'm not white, and then, one of my other co-workers, he said, "You know what? He's more American than you will ever be," and again, my buddy made this comment to the guy who made the comment about me saying that I'm not American of sort, and I looked at him. He said, "He's more American than you will ever be." He said, "The kid came to this country, you know. He served his country, he fought for this country, and he is still serving his country now," and the guy that made the comment, he had nothing to say. He just realized that ... he didn't think about it, and it just made me realize like, "Hey, you know what? You're right." If that's the meaning of being like a patriot or an American etc., because I was under the perception if you're American, you're white. I mean, I was a foreigner, but because of that comment, it just made me realize like, "Hey, that was one of my goals was to fit in the whole time," and what better way than to serve this country and to have that comment

made me realize like, yes, I did it; I've accomplished, and I am an American, and I care not put down others, but more American like he said than you will ever be because I put my life on line for your country, and I still continue to do so serving your community. So, that made me feel really good, but back to the boot camp thing, once you graduated, it was great, came home

NM: I wanted to ask before you get into that, did all of your family members come down?

TN: No, it was a far ride from New Jersey to South Carolina, so my oldest brother was the only family member, I think him and his friend were the only ones that came down from my family. My friends from high school and my girlfriend, they came down, they drove together, because it was like twelve, fourteen hour ride or something like that, so that's all that came down from my family.

NM: So, please continue, after boot camp you returned back to New Jersey?

TN: Yes, after boot camp, I returned to New Jersey, totally different person; I couldn't believe it, what I just did, and my mom and dad, they hugged me, and, it's like our culture, well, I can speak for my family at least, you don't get a lot of like Mom and Dad hugging you and saying, "I'm proud of you." They just don't say those things. They'll show it, I mean, whether it be a hug or whatever the case may be, but it's not like say you're typical family where they say it, but I knew what they meant, and they looked at me as a different person too. So, here I am a Marine, and now ten days later from my leave I go back to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; this is where I was stationed. ... I go to my MOS school, which is Military Occupational Specialty. Since I enlisted as infantry, I went to a school of infantry, so I went there for I think it was seven weeks, I believe, I can't recall, and I learned the trade and being in the school of infantry again I felt more ... with the in-crowd. You know, I wasn't that outcast kid like I've always thought myself to be, and it was a tough course. You're basically out there in the elements, the woods, rain, snow, sleek, hail. As infantry, you're there fighting the elements, so that's where you live; you live outside. You're living in tents, and you're braving the weather

NM: At this point, you interact much more with your fellow Marines, so did you develop friendships among those in your unit?

TN: Oh, of course. I make friends easily, but like any other organization where you have people from different backgrounds all grouped up together, you're going to have guys with different attitudes or demeanors etc., but one thing that we all know is like, "Hey, we all had a common goal," and that was, as I said, that we all became Marines. So, it was no conflict of any sort. Some of my best friends were from the Marine Corps, because again, just speaking about me, my experiences as a Marine Corps infantry unit, we're pretty tight, you've got to be, because that occupation requires you to look out for each other's back, because your training for fighting and the training, the maneuvers, and everything associated is to not only suppress the enemy, but also to protect your brother Marine. So, we formed a tighter bond, and being in infantry, like I said, it's a pretty good feeling, because you know like you're the lead element. When it comes to any conflict, you're going to be going in first, you're going to be doing what you've got to do. This is one of those units, like I said, I just felt like, if you're in the Marine Corps, infantry is definitely for me. ... When it comes to the Marines, we're the fighting unit, but like I said, making friends

in there, no problem. ... I didn't meet any Vietnamese people on there, but I did see like other Asians; I don't know of what background though, but funny though, it is a sigh of relief though, believe it or not, to be in there and to see another Asian. Funny as it may sound, because, like I said, growing up not seeing other Vietnamese kids or anything like that, and to see one was kind of like, I don't know how to describe it, it's like, "Hey look, there are others."

NM: In terms of world events, right around now, it should be things are happening in the Middle East.

TN: Yes, I did forget a point, while I was in boot camp, December of 1989, during boot camp, believe it or not, there was a conflict down with Panama, I think it was, was it Noriega?

NM: I think so.

TN: Yes, all of a sudden, we're just training, and this conflict erupts regarding, like I said Panama, Noriega, and there were troops down there fighting, and that beefed up our training, believe it or not, the instructors kind of emphasized like, "Hey, you know, there is fighting now. This is the real deal, and you guys better get your heads out of your ass, basically, because it could be you, and this is what you're trained to do," etc. We had to definitely take the training seriously to begin with, but now the fact that while you're training there is a conflict going on that when you graduate, you could be sent to that conflict. So, you really better get squared away, as they say, but the goal of the infantry school, again that conflict I believe ended within a couple of weeks or so. It was just a brief moment, but going through the school of infantry, again, it was really tough. You're out there in the elements. I actually graduated top of my class. I was about a group of I would say a hundred twenty. That's like a company size of a hundred twenty or fifty, and I graduated school of infantry as undergrad, so I got my award, you know, the whole thing. I was like, "Oh, this pretty cool," and after the school of infantry, then you're assigned to your unit, what they call Fleet Marine, so now you're with the Marines that were assigned, and I was assigned to the Charlie Company, First Battalion Eighth Marines Infantry Unit, and that was, they were stationed in Camp Lejeune. So, my school of infantry training was in Camp Geiger which was only like ten, fifteen miles away or something like that, so then you get transferred over to the main base camp, Lejeune, and I got my orders to be with Charlie Company, First Battalion, Eighth Marines. By the way, like when you graduate the school of infantry, that time period in, you're given the rank of private first class, E2, because when you first joined, you're an E1 private, and after school of infantry, you're E2, but then because I got honor graduate, I got promoted meritoriously to the next rank, E3, which is a lance corporal. So, I go to report to my station and everything, my new unit, and with that rank, those are guys that are usually in a couple of years already, because you have to wait like I think another eighteen months in order to get that rank after the rank of E2. Why I mentioned that is, because like they call us boots, meaning like you're a new guy out of boot camp; you're a boot. If you get to a unit, and you're E2, you got one stripe they call it, or mosquitoes wings, they're going to mess with you just like any organization where you're the new guy, you're going to mess with you. Of course, I can't go to the detail, because it's something that expects tradition, but they'll mess with you, but because of my rank as an E3, they thought I was just a transfer from another unit, and so, they didn't mess with me, and the whole time, I'm thinking, "Hey, why are they messing with those guys and not me?," but then when I told them how I got the rank, they said, "Oh, you're a

boot too," and of course, they messed with me, big mistake, but now, you're with the unit, and you're with guys that are salty, as they said, guys that had been in, guys that know more about it than you, and later I was actually deployed to Saudi Arabia for Operation Desert Storm, and I don't know if you wanted me to get into that.

NM: What were your everyday activities while you were stateside?

TN: Yes, stateside, which is where they refer to as Camp Lejeune, you're an infantry outfit, so your training is Tuesday you get trucked out into the field. You go out there, doing maneuvers, play like war games against force on force with other units; of course, you're using blanks, but you just try to hone down your skills as far as taking a position, holding your defensive position, and then, usually around Thursday, ... is when they bring you back to the barracks. You live in barracks; they're like three men rooms, so usually Thursday you come back, you shower up, clean up, because you are dirty, you're filthy out there for three days, like I said, rain, sleet, snow, hail; there's no getting out of the elements. So, then Friday you clean up all your gear, your weapons and everything, and you have inspection of all your gear, weapons inspections is usually on Fridays, and then, Friday afternoon, at four thirty, they cut you loose for the weekend, to Liberty Call. When you're in the infantry, like I said, you're just constantly training from Tuesday's to Thursday's and just, like I said, before it's just maneuvers out in the field, all kinds of stuff; you learn rappelling. It depends also like what unit, like Charlie Company, in the battalion there were three companies, and a weapon's company. So, you have Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie Company, and you have weapon's company. Weapon's company is like guys with machineguns and the mortars etc., so how it's broken down is your battalion, each company will be assigned to like specialized unit, like for instance like Alpha Company, they would be riding in the tracked vehicles. These are vehicles that, they're amphibious, they float, they can go in the ocean, and then, storm the beaches as an amphibious assault, and then, another company would be specialized in boat operations, so they would work with the Zodiac boats--those are like the black river boats--and then there's Charlie Company; we were the helo company, as they call it, because we would work with helicopters. So, we would get flown in to landing zones or LZs as they referred to, dropped in to do our mission etc., and be extracted by helo, so now you have, you see the three special units, and we have a company that can do tracked vehicle operations, and you have a company that can do boat operations, and you have a company to do HELO ops, so that makes up the specialized unit of that battalion, and Charlie Company, we're HELO company at the time. So, we got to fly in helicopter a lot, get dropped off, and you get picked up by it, but also, you learn how to (fast rope?), it's called, like how to slide down a rope of a hovering helicopter, because if the helicopter can't land on say a landing zone because there is just no room, a lot of trees, etc., then they would just deploy a rope, and then, you would slide down the rope, sort of like a fireman's pole to get down to the ground and achieve your objective, or a boat company, they would do water ops in river, bays, ocean, wherever the case may be, and the tracked vehicle companies they would deploy from the ship or then launched and do like an amphibious assault, and it could be a combination of all three if need be, whatever the mission asked for, and then, the next year you may be boat company or track company; it changes.

NM: Okay. How long would you stay with this unit? Let us just say there was not conflict going on abroad. Is it like two years, and then, you get transferred to another or is it like you stay with them for all four years.

TN: Yes, well I enlisted for four years active duty so you're assigned to this unit, and I think one of the criteria is you have to serve with that unit for a minimum two years before you can actually put in for transfer or request for transfer, but, you know, that wasn't my interest, and I didn't apply for that, but basically, that's your unit, however, I was transferred later on, because, I mean, I'll get to that latter, because, I'm trying to jump in the subject, but when I was with the First Battalion, Eighth Marines, I thought that should be my unit for the next remaining years of my contract, whatever it is, three years or so. ... So, now, I'm with the unit and it's December. I believe back in June of 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, and, you know, the conflict started, President George Bush authorized use of the military aid at first, and I think it was called Operation Desert Shield from that point on, so here I am, telling my parents that there's nothing to going on, and here it is a year after boot camp, I'm going to be engaged in a conflict, you know, definitely we're going over there, we're working up to it, we're working, we're training more often, especially, with the threat of chemical weapons; it's unlike anything that we would know, so we trained like conventional warfare, fighting, shooting, etc., but the threat of the chemical weapons is, like I said, it's nothing that we really were used to or trained in, so knowing that they can just spray the air with chemicals to kill you was very frightening at least to me. That wasn't something I had envisioned as far as being in a fighting unit. To me, that's playing dirty, if you ask me. So, that's what we retrained for, and when you train for a chemical weapon's warfare, you have to wear a chemical suit, you have to wear masks, you have to wear glove, you're completely sealed, and being in the desert environment, it's not very comfortable. I remember like we were there, well, let me just back up, so we were training, and of course, we were getting ready to deploy the first time we were deployed, the busses pulled up and we were mustered up or gathered up, and I remember, now, I lived on base. I'll go home, once in a while, weekends etc. to see my family and friends in Jersey, but there are other people that live on base with their wives and their families, etc. or off base as they may say, and when we got word that we may deploy to Kuwait, all the wives and family members came to the base to wish their loved ones, you know, farewell, good luck, and it was very emotional to see the tears and not knowing what can happen to them, if they're going to return. It almost gives me a little flashback of when I was in Vietnam, how all that emotion, what they're feeling, and it was very, like I said, very sad part, because this is something they don't train you to do, to deal with, is how to part with your loved ones and not know what the outcome may be, but what happened it was, we stood down; it was cancelled, so we were back to our regular training schedule, and sure enough, a couple weeks later, word got out that our unit was going to be deployed, and again, everybody congregated, wives and kids and everything, and we thought that it was just going to be another false deployment schedule of some sort, but then when we saw the busses pull in, like a lot of busses, like twenty busses, that's when we knew it's the real deal, and that's when, like I said, all the wives and the kids they all kind of erupted and cried and knowing that this is it. I mean, I didn't have nobody there for me, again, so I was kind of like the observer, but to see everybody else hugging and kids crying and everything like that, it is definitely, like I said, so emotional that it just brought me back to when I came to this country, that whole feeling, and sure enough, we made our way to the airport, got on a jet, and off we went on our way to Saudi Arabia. It was twenty something hour flight, and here we are. This is what we trained for; this is the real deal, and the whole time I was saying to myself like, "I can't believe I told my parents there's nothing going on here, and here I am a year later, and I'm going to war," and now I had to tell my parents that I'm going overseas to war, and they didn't take that lightly, but they knew that I was already

committed, I was already in, there's nothing they can do, so they just told me to stay safe and be safe etc. Of course my mom cried, and this is all by telephone, so it wasn't even personal. I never really got to say goodbye, like the other families on base did. So, I'm overseas, and I remember the plane getting ready to land. There's just nothing, but desert all around you, as far as you can see, nothing like the what North Carolina looked like the trees etc., but I'm like, "Oh, boy, why would anybody want to fight out here? There's nothing to gain. It's all desert," but that's just me thinking and sure enough, landed, and now, we start training for desert warfare wearing our masks, our chemical masks or suits etc., and we got into our vehicles. These are the, like I said, the amphibious vehicles, the tracked vehicles. They hold about twenty-five Marines in each vehicle, and that was, we were call a mechanized unit, so we would make our way towards the border of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, because that's where the Iraqis had occupied, so we just did the whole ordeal of get into the vehicles, moving closer to the frontlines, wait for orders, but every time we would stop, we would have to dig in, as they say, a defensive perimeter, so for next three-and-a-half, four months, I lived in a hole in the desert, so basically every time the vehicle stops, and everybody is on line, you know, your whole unit, you take your little shovel, you dig into the sand, and it's got to be big enough to fit the cot that they issued you. So, it had to be at least ... four feet wide, seven feet long, and the Marine Corps like, we called it a "fighting hole" where it's got to be deep enough ... to your armpit, the hole, so this way you can engage enemy from your fighting hole if they start firing, but that's where you lived. You lived in there, and you put a poncho over the hole to protect you from the sun. You'd be there for a couple of weeks at a time, and then, you get orders to pick up, you get in the vehicle and move closer to the frontline, and then, you settle in there, and then, you dig in again. I think I must have dug like maybe ten holes, and then, sometimes the sand is really like easy to dig into, sometimes it's rocky, sometimes it's shale, sometimes it's loose, where it just keeps collapsing on you as the case may be, but that was our home for the next few months, and finally, as got closer to the frontlines, and we got the word to move in to liberate Kuwait, I guess, so all that we've trained up to this point, I tell you, this is so real when you're hearing vehicles being blown up like in minefields etc., and, you know we're taking casualties. Again, it was a brief war; it was only four days, but again, this is as real as it gets for me, and the scariest moment was crossing the minefields. Now apparently the Iraqis had put so many mines along the border of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia to prevent us from coming in that they said they were littered like acorns out there, that's how many mines, because you bury them in sand, but then, the sand storm blows by exposes them, some of them. So, we're in the vehicle, and our company, there was probably like twenty something vehicles. So, the engineers, the guys that are experts in mines, they look for the best area to cross, the minefield. They say it was like mile and miles long by a mile wide this minefield, so the object was to clear the minefield, so they had a tank with a plow on it, like a V-shaped plow. It would plow through the minefield, and then, the whole time we're waiting in idle, in the troop vehicles that were in. Keep in mind, the tank is a lot more, it's like heavily armored. Our vehicles are light skinned armor, because they have to float; it can't be that heavy, and we're just hearing the transmission on the radio in the vehicle. Sure enough the first tank goes through, hits a mine; it blows up. The personnel in tank weren't killed; they're okay, you know; they're shaken up by it, but the vehicle was disabled to say the least, so they had to send another vehicle around that disabled vehicle and continue to press through and plow the minefield, and that vehicle also was blown up, and then, they had to send a third tank, to plow the rest of the way and we're in the clear, so here it is, now that they created path, let's send the troops through, and that's us, and I remember this was the scariest moment of my life being in

the military, was going through that minefield, knowing that two vehicles had blown up, and here you are, going through, what they hope is a cleared path, and I couldn't stop, but wondering, the whole time we're in this vehicle with twenty-four other Marines, and it's pitch dark in there, by the way, because the hatches were sealed in the event of a chemical attack, so the vehicle was sealed tight, and it dark. You couldn't see the guy in front of you; that's how dark it was, except that there was very little green light that, the tactical green light that was in the vehicle, and I couldn't help, but to wonder how it would feel if this vehicle blew up, like the thought of death basically; would it be quick, would it be a hot flash, would it be a loud flash or dismemberment, as explicit as it may be, but you have to realize, you have to kind of wonder what it would be like; is death going to be quick, ... are you going to suffer, but fortunately, we made it through, and as I said, that vehicle was going so slow, and I could just feel, like anticipate, what it would be like, and it was scary. Finally, we managed to clear through, and then, we pressed on, and here it is; all of sudden, we're pushing through, and the vehicle commander tells us, "Enemy contact front, enemy contact front," he's yelling loud to us, and the back of the vehicle, the whole door drops, and of course, I was in the first fire team, so they sent us out to go and actually engage. So, here's the enemy in plain view. Keep in mind, you're in the desert, so you can see kind of farther away. It wasn't like a triple canopy jungle or a wooded area, like a covered concealment; this is just an open plain field, but here it is; my first engagement with an enemy. Someone is trying to kill me. We got out there, weapons pointed down range, we did our maneuvering, and sure enough, I see movement; I see Iraqis coming towards us, but there's rules of engagement. Of course, I see a lot of white flags too. They're holding white flags, ribbons, even sticks with toilet paper streamers as a form of white flag, which means that they're surrendering. So, if they're doing that obviously rules of engagement doesn't allow you to engage, and they were giving up. We took precaution and searched them, took their weapons away and corralled them etc., and then, behind us there's trucks back there that would take the POWs that were giving up, and that process went on just about all day, the first day of the war. Again, here we're trained to fight this fierce enemy, Iraqi Republican Guard, which is their elite force, and they were the aggressors. They drove out the Kuwaitis, so we're expecting opposition, and it wasn't so. They were just coming to us hands up, and they were just surrendering by the thousands. I can't remember how many prisoners I processed that day, but again, with every group of prisoners that come up there, you've got to be careful. When I was in Desert Storm, I was what they call automatic rifleman, much I was to deploy the M249 machinegun. It's a belt fed machine gun, so I was, like I said, the machine gunner of that fire team. So, as each group came closer, I provided security for my team by having weapons on target, etc., and it was coming to this one point where we had this group of I think it was five or six Iraqis, and keep in mind, a Marine Corps squad is about maybe twelve, thirteen, three teams within a squad, etc., so it was routine, they would come to us, we'd do our thing, search them, secure them, and then, we zip tie their hands with a zip ties and send them back to the trucks. Well, this one particular Iraqi guy, he just started running around in circles, and he's pointing to the sky. Now, I'm providing cover, and the guy in my squad had weapons pointing to this guy, and he's running up to them, and they obviously didn't speak English, and they were telling them, "Get down, get down, get down," but he wouldn't. He just put both hands in the sky; he actually grabbed the muzzle of one of our guy's M16. I'm thinking, "This guy is going to get shot by Davenport, whose weapon he grabbed." I thought he was just going to feel threatened and use it, use deadly force, and it just occurred to me that he's point to the sky, and then, he was holding his head, holding his ears, I should say, near the ear area with both hands, and I looked around, and there's like crates of

bombs, because we had dropped like numerous bombs like a whole month before the troops actually went in, so what happened was bomb exploded, and he lost his hearing, and that's what he was indicating by pointing up the sky, the planes with bombs, and he was pointing to his ears to say, so he was deaf from that, and again, I don't know if it caused him to be crazy; he was running around, and I relayed that, because I just realized, "Hey, he can't hear you." That's what I'm trying to say. So, I relay that to the guys in the squad, and they understood now, and instead of shooting him, they tackled him to the ground and secured him, good thing--I said it would have been necessary, but the whole time I was thinking, where is this engagement, fighting thing that we're supposed to do; they're just giving up. I'm not saying I want a war, but it wasn't what I perceived it to be, and then, now that was the first day. Then, the second day more of the same, just pressing into Kuwait and more are surrendering, and then, this is what really got my attention. We just came up on a group of POW, and there was one that was injured. He was obviously injured from the bombings, and the ones that can walk, we obviously, we processed them and sent on their way, but there was one guy who was injured, and I tell you, he was so bad, so badly injured, his whole left leg is bloody and everything, and they wrapped it in clear plastic bag or something; that was the extent of their first aid because you got to keep in mind they invaded Kuwait in June of 1990. We didn't go in until I believe February, I think. January was like the bombing, and then, February or I could be mistaken; it could be February or March is when the troops like actually moved in. So, they were in the desert for that long period of time and living in the same conditions that we were living in, in holes basically, so you can imagine the morale was not that there. They were left out there in the desert to defend Kuwait for X amount of time. They were happy to see us, because obviously they were ruled by a dictator, Saddam. They had to be there, and when we got there, as I said, some were happy, we gave them water, we gave them food, you know, and as I said, this is my first time when I saw injured Iraqi soldier, he looked like a sixteen year old kid, what I mean to say is like his size. He was like about a hundred and twenty pounds, and he just had this like stare in his face, no movement, and, like I said, his leg was all wrapped in a plastic bag. You could see the blood right through it, a bloody mess, and I was told to secure him, which means to watch him until the medics get there, and the whole time, I'm just putting my weapon on this injured Iraqi, and he's just staring straight in my eyes. We're not talking, of course, and it wasn't like for a couple of minutes. It was a while; I was there for like twenty minutes, so I'm staring at this injured guy, and it just made me realized, "This is weird. This is not the enemy that I expected." I expected opposition, but yet here, this is somebody's son, this is somebody's husband, this somebody's father, and he's laid out here. So, it gives me a different perspective of the war, it brings you back to all the people that had suffered in Vietnam too when I like I said growing up in Vietnam as a six year old is different than growing up here. I've seen bodies littered on the road, I've seen boats on fire, I've seen people running chaotic, chaos, and I just, like I said, I go back to the war I just see this guy just laying there. Of course, finally the medics came, and they did what they did, and pressing on to the third day of the war, again more of the same, except this time we had some opposition. There was, I would say, a few more yards, there was this building, and apparently, we were taking fire from this building, so we got the word, "Open fire," our company laid out a base of fire, and just started firing in the direction of that building where we were taking fire from, and of course, we're maneuvering, getting closer, and everything like that, and then, they called in a couple of air strikes, and they just flattened that whole area out, and we actually went around that building. We've never even seen like if there's any casualties etc. because our objective was to just keep pressing, keep driving the Iraqis out of Kuwait. You can train all you

want, you can shoot blanks, but to actually have incoming fire, incoming rounds at you, your life flashes in front of you, because now you're fired upon, it's a whole lot different, it's not like training, it's not like somebody shooting blanks at you, and bullets are whizzing by you. It's a very weird sound. Trust me when I tell you, if anybody is not afraid when this happens, and they tell you otherwise, they're wrong, because when that round comes down range, you're hitting the deck; you're hitting the ground; you're taking cover, and you're hoping that you're not the next one to get shot. Then the adrenalin kicks in, and you do what you've got to do to repel the enemy's action. Then, as I said, they called a couple of air strikes, and that was done, and now, the third night, third night we dug in, but the ground was really like hard, I guess. It was lot of shell, a lot of rock, so we couldn't dig in too deep, and then, they also assigned like six M1A1 Tanks. It's called the Tiger Brigade. They were an Army unit that was assigned with us, it is pitch dark; in the desert, it is pitch dark. I mean, you cannot see someone in front of you ten feet away if the moon is not out. So, we just dug in the perimeter, and we got word that there was a brigade of Iraqi tanks coming at us of some sort. So, we pretty much expected a fight, so the tanks that were with us, they just start shelling over our heads towards the enemy from afar. I actually didn't see the enemy tank coming at us, because our technology and our weapon superiority, we had a far better reach than their tanks, and it didn't allow them to get close, but all night, the rounds are going over the hill to the enemy position, and that was pretty intense just to hear a lot of shelling when we trained we were on the range we were wearing ear plugs etc., but when you're now live firing, the decibels are a lot greater and to hear the tanks shoot from behind you couple a hundred yards back, it's pretty loud knowing there's an engagement going on. So, you're at heightened alert and like I said, we couldn't dig in deep, because the ground was so hard. We only had maybe six or eight inches to bury ourselves in to protect us from incoming fire, but we prevailed, got the job done. The enemy never got close to our position, and then, that was the third day, right, and the next day, the fourth day, more of the same. We finally pushed through and word on the radio was that it was over. We had liberated Kuwait, and we were actually in Kuwait now, the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border; we had actually pushed them all the way out. We were all celebrating and then, we find out, obviously, we had guys in our battalion that took artillery rounds from Iraq, and we lost like I think six guys in our battalion, but not in our company of a hundred and fifty or so, but other companies in our battalion had a total of like six casualties, and part of me, I couldn't help, but feel like, you know, even though it's six, that's six people not coming home, six fathers missing or dying or husbands or sons, etc. and again, that's something that I don't think anybody will understand when it comes down to it during the heat of battle, etc., it's just you and the guy next to you. It's you looking out for him, and him looking out for you; the rounds are coming, everything else goes out the window, and so, to hear that these six guys didn't make it, it's sad, you know, but you move on, press on, and finally after we pushed through, we waited for our turn to get flown back to stateside. It was a quick victory, and we did our job. It was a good feeling, and I flew home to a hero's welcome and that was pretty special, came back, and I felt like I did something really great, but again, during this whole interview, I've always stated how I felt like the outcast, the guy trying to fit in, trying to convince others, "I'm not the enemy," and for me to serve this country and to do something, to be engaged in combat, and come out as a victor, come home to a hero's welcome, it was definitely another chapter in my life where I grew closer to that goal of wanting to fit in, and it was really a good feeling, not only when we flew back to Camp Lejeune, but when I came home to Edison. My high school had set up a ceremony for all those who served in Edison, and I was invited. So, here I am, Joe, as I was referred to, is going to be a mentioned at the whole town ceremony,

parade--well, not a parade, just a ceremony at the football field, and all the people that I went to school with and that I know, now got to see me obviously in a different light as someone who did something good, who went out there, and fought for America etc., and that made me feel good.

NM: I do want to backtrack a little bit. I just have some follow up questions about your time in Kuwait, and it is mostly kind of observational. You mentioned that you, as you are going through, you see bomb craters, and I was wondering did you see, what did you see, were there disabled vehicles, were there buildings that were destroyed? Could you just describe what you saw?

TN: Yes, I mean, a war zone basically, a lot of disabled vehicles, like I said from the bombing sorties that occurred a month prior to us going to the country. ... I don't know how to describe it, but it was just like fires everywhere, and then, this is one thing I forgot to mention was the oil fires, which was apparently Saddam had his troops light all the oil fields on fire. So, I think this was like the third day of the conflict, and we were pushing through, and I could not believe, no, I'm sorry, this was actually after the fourth day, but ...

[Tape Paused]

NM: So, you are mentioning the oil fires.

TN: Okay, so the oil fires, apparently, I can't recall exactly the time, but it's about eleven o'clock in the morning, I remember we were in a convoy just pressing forward, and I see this dark skies up ahead, and we were actually going through it, and it's the oil fire, just the smoke, and I've never seen anything like it. It's eleven o'clock in the morning, and the trucks had to have their headlights on, because it's so dark now, we're in this black smoke and we were all covering our faces, our nose and mouth, because we don't want to breathe this stuff in, and it's everywhere. ... It's complete darkness; we were in darkness, and it's eleven in the morning, and we're driving through it, and then, all of a sudden, it rains later on that day, and there's puddles of black water everywhere, and that's from the rain, I guess, the black soot. Then, we find out that Saddam Hussein had ordered all his men to break all the refinery oil wherever and light them on fire. So, that's what was in the air, and yes, I mean, we were exposed to it, went through it, and couldn't believe why he would do such a thing. That was a memorable moment, going through the country and just seeing disabled vehicles everywhere, I even saw one burning, and there was a body. It was one of those Iraqi tanks that was blown up. I could see a body hovering over the turret of the tank from afar, but it's hard to make it out, and it's charred. So, it's like I said; that's what happens in war, and for me, it's just bringing back memories. Here I am finding myself how many years later in the middle of violence again, but like I said, this time it was for different reasons, that's what I saw, and it's never easy. It's not like the movies or what you see it on TV, it's totally different, because everybody has their own little opinion or their way of remembering what they saw. Me, like I said, it wasn't pleasant, but I think I had an advantage though because I had seen this before when I was in Vietnam, but to see it again, it maybe didn't faze me as much, because to me it's just like a reoccurrence, but I could tell you other guys in the unit, like you could tell it was, I don't know what's the best way to describe this whole situation of seeing bodies and disabled vehicles blown up and everything like that. At that point, it wasn't, it was

just like try to stay alive, just try to survive this ordeal and do what you got to do to get home; that's what was going through everybody's mind.

NM: It sounds like you were going through populated areas. Is that true?

TN: Yes, so our objective was to liberate Kuwait, so now we're actually going to Kuwait. The first sign of life was a couple little buildings and farm land; you can actually see green grass. They have irrigated farm land out there, and again, we didn't see any civilians, because they all like pushed out of there. I believe they went to Saudi Arabia when they fled the country, so we settled in like in the farmland area, portion of the Kuwaiti outskirts and just kept on pushing forward, and you could see the destruction that the Iraqis did. They just pretty much looted the whole city; anything that was moveable was gone, even when we searched through buildings, everything was taken out. They referred to that as "Highway of Death," is that one stretch of highway that led to Iraq, and that's when the Iraqis were getting pushed out, they were stealing anything they can, and the troops, blowing up whatever they can on vehicles and trying to flee the country because Kuwait is really a wealthy country, and of course, our forces shot up all those that were evading or leaving the city of Kuwait with all the stuff that they were stealing. I mean, I personally didn't get to see that "Highway of Death" as it was referred to, but yes, the city was in ruins, bullet holes everywhere, abandoned vehicles, burnt vehicles, just a total war zone, total mess, and you would think like there's no way they're going to rebuild this, but actually a year later, when I came back on my second tour to the Persian Gulf, I went to that same area of town, and it's totally up and running and better than before, because they just built it up. As I said, Kuwait is a very wealthy country and very Americanized too, in some parts. They even have restaurants and fast food places, like McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken over there; it's pretty weird. ...

NM: I know we are going to have to close this interview session, but I wanted to ask just one minor follow up. There were not any like civilians like older people who just wanted to hang on and stay. I understand sometimes people actually do stay in war zones.

TN: Yes, you're absolutely right, and I personally didn't see anyone. The areas that we operated in when we just continued, pressed on, there may have been like a couple of vehicles with people. Again, you just suspect that everybody else is the enemy, just as precautionary measure, but when we pushed through the towns and the cities, like I said, my area of operation, there was nobody sticking around.

NM: Alright, so this is going to conclude the second interview session with Tan Nguyen, and thank you for coming in today.

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Reviewed by Alexandra McKinnon 12/31/13

Reviewed by Nicholas Trajano Molnar 1/27/14

Reviewed by Tan Nguyen 2/18/2014