

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL T. RUANE

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

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TRANSCRIPT BY

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Shaun Illingworth: This begins the second oral history interview session with Colonel Michael T. Ruane on January 11, 2024, with Shaun Illingworth in New Brunswick, New Jersey. Thank you very much for sitting down with me again. Last time, we were talking about your tour in Vietnam. You had talked about how you would have your men adjust their ammo, take as much ammo as you could, but, also, change the cartridges from twenty to eighteen, I believe.

Michael Ruane: Yes.

SI: You said that that paid off when you were with Charlie Company. What did you mean by that?

MR: When I was with Charlie Company, 4th Battalion/31st Infantry Regiment, we got into a couple of pretty heavy actions where the amount of ammunition we had was very important. It's probably better if I go through the history of it and work from there, because this way here, it flows better in my mind.

SI: Oh, absolutely, yes.

MR: Around December of 1966, I was the operations officer, air operations, S-3 (Air), for the 3rd/21st Infantry. I had heard that the 4th Battalion, 31st Infantry was going to be relieving a company commander. I knew I wanted to go back out in the field.

I guess right after Christmas, between Christmas and New Year's, I went over to the 4th of the 31st. I got an appointment with the battalion commander. I knew him from Fort Devens when we're forming up the 196th, like I knew an awful lot of the officers, I knew a bunch of their company commanders, etc.

I asked him, I said, "Sir, I understand that you may be relieving one of your company commanders." He said, "How the hell did you figure that out, Ruane?" I said, "Well, sir, I've got a lot of friends. I've been with the brigade as long as you have and a couple of buddies filled me in on it. They said that you're going to be relieving Captain Izzy." He was the Charlie Company commander. He said, "Yes--why?"

I said, "Well, I'm interested in going back out into the field." He said, "Why would you want to go back out in the field?" I said, "Because I've still got something to do. I think I'd be better out there than I would be as a staff officer." We talked for a while, and he talked to his XO and his S-3. They agreed. They said, "Okay, come on over," and we got the paperwork squared away.

On January 6th, I took over command of Charlie Company, 4th/31st, from Captain Izzy. Izzy was probably the company commander for about two months. The previous company commanders, a guy by the name of Frank Pierce, who was a friend of mine, had got shot up pretty badly. So, Izzy replaced him, and then, Izzy did a couple of things that got a couple of guys killed. That was one of the reasons he was being relieved.

When I got to Charlie Company, one of the first things I did was sit down with the first sergeant and also with the radio operator, my radio operator, a guy by the name of Greg Kitchen. First

Sergeant's name was Bill Tremble. He was known as Pop Tremble. He was a World War II veteran, Korean War veteran and a Vietnam veteran. He was a tall, skinny guy, great soldier, respected him an awful lot.

I think he respected me, because Greg Kitchen, who was the radio operator, told me that the First Sergeant never went out in the field with Izzy, but he always went out in the field with me. He said he did not like Izzy; that was what Greg Kitchen told me.

What I did with Greg, again, he's the radio operator, but the thing is, he has a hook in with everybody. He knew all the guys in the company. He was the guy that I was expecting, between him and the First Sergeant, to be able to fill me in on what was going on in the company. "How is the morale? How's this? How's that? How were the troops trained?" etc.

It worked out that, after a period of about three weeks, Greg and I were on a first name basis. Yes, Greg and I were on a first-name basis and we have been the best of friends, right now, I guess, since that date, since that time. We see each other several times a year. We talk about every two weeks. We text all the time. Our wives love each other, which is a good thing, because that makes it a lot easier, but Greg was and is close.

Greg and I have talked about the fact that we should've died probably seven times, aside from a couple of inches here, a minute there, about ten seconds some other place. So, we are close. We are close.

I loved Alpha Company because I trained them all the way up from the time they got off buses up until the time they went into Vietnam, up until their first combat. Charlie Company was different, because I didn't know the guys, but, yet, I grew closer to some of them.

As someone says, "You could grow closer to some of the guys you served with than your own family." I grew closer to some of them than anyone else I ever got close to, simply because of what we went through.

When I took over the company, I guess it was--well, let's put it this way--in the 196th, the infantry company is supposed to have 165 guys in it. Platoons are probably about forty-five each; the infantry platoon is forty-five men. The mortar platoons are probably about twenty-some-odd guys. The headquarters was a few others.

By the time we're six months in-country, most of the companies were down to maybe 120 guys. That was because people had been killed, wounded, other people had been sick--I mean, there's a whole bunch of different reasons--people are on leave. So, how many people you brought out to the field varied.

So, when I went to Charlie Company, I guess we had maybe about 120 guys. There was only three platoon leaders. One of the infantry platoons was commanded by a platoon sergeant. A lot of the squads were commanded by E-5s and E-4s instead of E-6s. It was pretty much attrition.

We went out, I guess, on our first mission; I'm trying to figure out right now. We went out on our first mission south of the Tây Ninh Base Camp. We ended up out there for a couple of days. We got hit by sniper fire and the guys reacted to it.

[Editor's Note: Tây Ninh is the capital city of Tây Ninh Province in southeastern Vietnam. It is located about fifty miles north of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City).]

I was watching the way they reacted to it and they were moving pretty good. The platoon leaders and the NCOs had their people in control. They were in control of their fire and maneuver. I was pleasantly surprised. The First Sergeant, when I said that to him, he said, "Sir, that's in spite of Izzy." He said, "That's because of the NCOs that you've got." He said, "You've got some good NCOs."

Right around that time, also in the first month, we started moving people. I got a new executive officer and one new platoon leader. Then, when we came back in from that little trip in the field, we were doing night patrols, night ambushes.

I had this one platoon leader that was supposed to take his people out a click out in front of the brigade base camp and set up an ambush. I found out afterwards that the guy just went out past the bunker line where he couldn't be seen and hunkered down. He came back in and I court-martialed him. So, I got rid of him.

SI: How did you find that out?

MR: One of the guys told me.

SI: Okay.

MR: Yes, one of the sergeants said, "Hey, sir, you've got to know about this guy," and I called him in, set him up for a summary court-martial, passed him on up to brigade and never heard of him again. I got a good platoon leader who came in and took his place, a guy by the name of Jimmy Williams. Williams was all of about five-foot-nine inches, skinny. Well, most of us were skinny, over there anyway.

I guess we went out and did a couple of security missions around this place called Núi Bà Đen (Black Virgin Mountain), which was maybe about four or five miles away from the Tây Ninh Base Camp. It was pretty easy duty for the most part. I had one of my guys--here you go, another thing--I had a kid by the name of Joe Curran. He was an E-4 and his father was actually the head of the union for tugboats, tugboat operators in New York harbor.

Well, he decided he wanted to go up Black Virgin Mountain and he went AWOL [absent without leave], and went up Black Virgin Mountain. We owned the bottom, the VC owned the middle and Special Forces owned the top. Well, he went all the way up there.

[Editor's Note: The Vietcong (VC), or National Liberation Front, was a Communist organization within South Vietnam that battled with American forces and collaborated with the North

Vietnamese Army and government in an effort to unite South Vietnam under the Communist government of North Vietnam. The Vietcong carried out both guerilla operations and regular Army operations.]

We're trying to figure out, "Where the hell is Curran?" I get a call from the Special Forces on top, "Hey, I've got one of your guys up here." So, we sent a helicopter up, brought him down and proceeded to bust him. I mean, I made him an E-3.

I told him, I said, "Joe," I said, "if I had told you to go up there and you did it, I would've given you a freaking Silver Star." I said, "You went up there on your own, man. You scared the hell out of a lot of us. You worried a lot of us." He ended up being a fire team leader, and then, eventually, becoming a squad leader by the time I left Vietnam.

We got into one of our actions (one of the after-action reports you have there); there was little stuff that went on during this time when we're out in C Zone. There'd be snipers or we'd come across some punji pits or empty base camps or something like this.

[Editor's Note: War Zone C was an American military operations area within the tactical zone of III Corps in South Vietnam along the Cambodian border. Its eastern boundary ran parallel to Highway 13. A punji stick is a sharpened stick or bamboo strategically placed within booby traps to impale.]

There was one time when intelligence came in about where an enemy base camp was supposed to be--it's supposed to be a hospital and a bicycle repair shop. I couldn't figure out why the hell they put both of them together, but they did. So, my mission was to go out and try and locate it. So, we started forward. We're out probably about three or four hours coming up on it.

The First Platoon commander, I believe it was Manny Joglar was the platoon leader at the time, and his platoon sergeant was a guy by the name of Felicimo Hugo. He was a World War II veteran. In World War II, he was a guerilla in the Philippines at that time. He was just a young kid. The war was over, he joined the United States Army. He lived in Hawaii and he was an excellent platoon sergeant.

Well, they went forward, coming up on the base camp. We're going in company column, because we didn't know we were that close to the base camp. The First Platoon hit it, triggered the ambush by the bad guys. We had one guy wounded, but the platoon started moving forward.

Hugo went forward with the First Squad and they stitched him. They killed him. An automatic weapon took him straight up from the groin all the way up to his shoulders. I think one other guy was wounded. One other guy was bit by a snake. So, we didn't get too far.

The VC pulled back. We brought artillery in. We moved forward. We didn't find anything. So, we ended up going back to where battalion had a base in the middle of C Zone. We went back to the base. The next day, B Company went out. They got shot up, still looking for the same hospital complex. Bob Leckie was the CO of B. The next day after that, they sent us back out.

This is probably one of the best movements my company ever made. We went out early in the morning. I guess we left around four o'clock. It was still dark. It was just starting to turn light. We knew generally where the base camp was. We'd approached it from the south two days ago and B Company approached from the west. We were down south-southwest of the base camp. I just remember that I wanted to move south of it, go up north, and then, approach the base camp from the north.

That's basically what we did, but I just remember, just moving through there, you could've heard a pin drop. I mean, the guys, I guess we had about 110 guys out in the field at that time--no, we had 110 before, a couple of days before that. Then, we lost four or five guys when the First Platoon got hit.

So, we came back around and we entered into the base camp from the north. That was when all hell broke loose. Literally, I guess it lasted probably for an hour-and-a-half, two hours, something like that. The VC were not only in fixed positions, but they were also up in the trees.

The way I usually did my company was when we were moving in and we expected to get hit, we went in two platoons on line with one squad down each flank, the right flank and the left flank, of the company. One platoon would be for reserve and myself and my CP [command post] group would be in the middle between the two attacking platoons. Our job was to keep watch on the trees, okay, let the guys forward worry about the ground.

Our thing was to try and keep people out of the trees, because, normally, my CP group, when we're out in the field, is myself; Greg Kitchen, who handled my battalion RTO [radio/telephone operator]; a guy by the name of B.J. Benoit, he had my company radio, Jack Gominiak, (who lives down here, believe it or not, in East Windsor, he was my forward observer), and his RTO, a guy by the name of Joe Ski; and then we normally had another sergeant. So, there's six of us.

So you had four or five weapons, anyway, that will cover the trees. When we got into the fight, it ended up that--this is a couple of things that Greg and I talked about it--all of a sudden, a machine-gun opened up. It was someplace in front of us, Greg said, and we were sitting one behind the other, Greg behind me, and I had Jack (Gominiak) get ready to call in artillery. All of a sudden, I'm talking to battalion over the net and I'm talking in a normal voice. Next thing I know, [Colonel Ruane whispers] I'm talking like this. It's like in a whisper.

I say, "Greg, check the radio, see what's wrong." What happened, apparently, Greg's radio antennae was shot off. So, now, if the antennae's shot off, okay, I have the here next to my ear here, and Greg's behind me, the antenna next to his head. So, that bullet went straight past our heads to take the antenna off.

SI: Wow.

MR: Greg said, "Mike, we'd better get down and we'd better split." So, we both hit the ground, moved a couple of feet apart. All of a sudden, a machine-gun just stitched a line of bullets straight up between us, and that was number two.

The guys were in, literally, pretty much of a knock-down, drag-out. I mean, there were hand grenades. There was one guy that came upon a VC, and then, beat him to death with his helmet. I know that Greg shot at least one guy out of the trees. I think I got two guys out of the trees.

Our third platoon, which was the reserve platoon, as the stuff is happening, they sort of got mixed up because the jungle was very thick and you could only see a few feet in front of you. All of a sudden, they were getting ready to open fire because they heard firing in front of them. I said, "That's us, hold off, no, no."

SI: Wow.

MR: SFC Deitweiler was the platoon sergeant, brought his platoon up on line. Then, we did what we had to do and pushed through the base camp. We didn't find anybody there. We found cooking fires, are still warm. So, we caught them in the middle of a meal, something along those lines. We started pulling back. There was a pretty extensive After Action Report by the Brigade when we got back to Tay Ninh.

At that time, I think we had four or five killed. We had about--I think the after-action report said something like five or six guys wounded. It was more than that. The five or six were the guys who we had evac out by helicopter.

When we were going back out, the VC were starting to follow us. We're able to make it into a clearing, small clearing. We had to use det chord to knock down a couple of trees to evacuate the dead and seriously wounded. The Huey couldn't get in, but an observation helicopter could get in. Observation choppers held just two people.

[Editor's Note: The Bell UH-1 Iroquois, or "Huey," a utility helicopter, was used extensively in the Vietnam War.]

So, what we literally did, you had the pilot--there wasn't anyone else, just the pilot--he came in. We strapped one of the dead guys in, he lifted him off, lifted off a couple of the dead guys that way. We carried a couple of them out.

We had a Huey drop a basket down--and I've got a little story on this one, too. So, we strap on one of the seriously wounded guys into it and he was being lifted up. All of a sudden, the basket started bouncing.

Apparently, the VC had shot at the helicopter and it went through the--in a Huey, there's small plexiglass window right down near your feet--it went through the window and, apparently, hit one of the men, the pilot or co-pilot, in the leg. That's what caused the thing to drop or to bounce.

About the medevacs, we used to lie to them. [laughter] They knew that the infantry guys used to lie to them, because we'd call a medevac in, it's like, "Medevac 2-9, this is Slugger Charlie 6." "Medevac 2-9, what's the situation?" "Cold, cold." The guy's hearing all sorts of firing and rifle fire, machine-gun fire going off in the background.

These guys were from Tây Ninh and we knew some of them. We used to drink with some of them sometimes. "Slugger Charlie 6, you lying son of a bitch." [laughter] He said, "I can hear it down there." We said, "Roger, we're getting hit. Can you make it in?" "We'll be in." They'd come in, they'd come in. They were unbelievable, those guys.

We eventually pulled out, got all our guys out, got back to battalion base probably about four o'clock that afternoon. Most of the guys were down--we're talking about ammunition. Like I said, I used to carry twenty magazines, plus, I had another fifteen, twenty boxes of ammo. I think I had two magazines left and all the boxes of ammo I'd already passed out to all my guys. Most of my grenadiers were just down to maybe four or five rounds each, because we just put it down range at the VC.

One of the things, when you get into some action, was lay down a base of fire and just put out as much as you can until you can figure out what the hell the situation is. It went off. We lost guys. We figured we killed seven or eight, maybe nine, ten of them, that we're pretty definite about, but they got four or five of ours. So, that's not fair odds, no matter how the hell you look at it.

After that, we did a couple of other things. By that time, the company started off with 110 guys, we're down to about sixty-eight guys left in the company. So, we pretty much ended up just doing bunker duty—or if not bunker duty, security--for the battalion base camp until we came back in.

SI: When you would go out like that, would you have a medic with you?

MR: Oh, yes.

SI: Yes.

MR: Yes. Normally, we had a medic with each platoon. Yes, so, we'd have at least three medics, we'd have at least three medics.

We even brought out our mortar when we're at the battalion base camp out in C Zone. We'd have our mortars, but it wouldn't be one of our eighty-one-millimeter mortars. We traded for a sixty-millimeter mortar with the Special Forces. For a forty-five caliber pistol, they gave us a sixty-millimeter mortar.

So, that was a good thing to have in the field, not so much in the jungle, but, if you're in a relatively open area, you can lay down a base of fire with a sixty-millimeter mortar until you can get artillery fire coming in. It gave you an immediate base of fire, because you could just get a helmet, put it in the base of the helmet, just start dropping rounds in and adjust just by looking.

When we were about ready to come in, I sent my XO in, Jimmy, Jimmy Smith. I said, "I want every fire barrel in the company filled with beer and soda." We came in for three days and the company stood down. The only guy that was in charge of the company was the supply sergeant

and the XO. Everyone else was either sleeping, resting, going to the PX, whatever they could do. We're waiting for new guys to come into the company.

I know, one morning, I guess maybe the second day in, I got up and went down to the latrine. There's one of my mortar NCOs, a guy by the name of Sergeant Wagner, who's in there, big, tall guy; he had to be six-four, six-five. He was in there brushing his teeth and gargling with Johnny Walker Black. So, I mean, "Hey, okay, no problem at all."

So, we were in for a week or so. We got new guys in and we married them up with our old guys, our veterans.

SI: Yes.

MR: Like the guys say, "Hey, you don't want to get too close to them, because you don't know how the hell long they are going to last." So, this was the opposite of that. We had two of the guys out in the bunker line, one of the new guys and George Hulse, one of our original men when the Brigade formed up at Ft Devens.

All of a sudden, I got a call over the radio, "There's been an accident on the bunker line." My driver and I hopped in a jeep. We headed on down to the bunker line. What happened was, apparently, Hulse and this kid were screwing around. They were jerking around with the rifle. The kid had a round in the chamber and apparently the safety was off. The round went off and it caught Holtz right in the face and blew the back of his head out.

He was still barely alive when I got there. We put him in the jeep. I just remember, I'm sitting in the back of the jeep with Hulse and what's left of his head. The back of his head was in my hand and it was brain matter, it was grey liquid, there was blood, there was bone. I just know that when we got him to the hospital, it was too late. I mean, he was dead on the way there. This was one of the things that lasted with me for years, that I couldn't do anything for the kid.

We ended up taking the kid that did it, sent him back to battalion. What they did from there, I don't know, but we just didn't want him in the company. The kid was torn to pieces. His first week in-country and, all of a sudden, something like this happened, he kills one of our own guys.

We went on other small operations, up until it was the end of April. I forget when we went up north to Chu Lai. Before that, we went back out in C Zone a lot of times. One time, we're up at a place called (Tri B?), which is a Special Forces camp, heading up towards the Cambodian border.

In the Special Forces camp, there was an airfield. So, our battalion was around the airfield and my company was right in front of where the Special Forces camp was. It was interesting, because the Special Forces guys told us, "Hey, we don't know who are the good guys and who are the bad guys here. We know we've got a bunch of bad guys in here, but we don't know who the hell they are."

What happened, second night we were there, someone rolled a couple of grenades down the berm of the SF camp, because we were maybe twenty, thirty, maybe twenty yards in front of where the berm was. where we had our foxholes. All of a sudden, a couple of grenades came down the hill--so, someone inside was throwing grenades.

So, it's pretty much that, from there on in, one guy was watching the top of the berm, watching the Special Forces' berm, and the other guys are watching out front. We ended up having to go out on a company-sized ambush (actually, three platoon ambushes), but the company was going out. So, I went out from Tri Bi and darker than hell, into C Zone.

We're looking for the Ninth VC Division. They were supposedly moving through C Zone. Something happened, because you're walking at nighttime and, if you're not very careful, okay, you get split up. Well, we ended up getting split up. [laughter]

So, let's just say my First Platoon went this way. My group is behind them. So, it was like two guys from the First Platoon, it was my headquarters, and then, it was a squad from the Second Platoon. The rest of the Second Platoon was some other place and the Third Platoon was in another location. And there we are. Instead of having twenty-five guys in an ambush, there was about nine of us.

It was me, my two RTOs, Jack Gominiak, his RTO, and two guys from this platoon and one guy from that platoon. It was like, "Okay, guys, here it is. We're on our own; set up." We didn't have any claymores and didn't have any tripwires or anything else like that. That's what the platoons are carrying, not these individuals from the platoon, because we were supposed to stay with the Second Platoon that night.

So, we're lying there, the nine of us everyone's lying there. You've got your weapon out and you've got your magazines ready if you needed them. You've got a couple of grenades that you can pull them and throw them quickly if you needed to. All of a sudden, we started hearing noise. It's almost like a... [Editor's Note: Colonel Ruane scratches the table.]

SI: Oh, a little scratching, yes.

MR: Yes, and it's just like a hum, if you want to call it. All of a sudden, everyone is--okay, the "pucker factor" came. I don't know if you know what the pucker factor is.

SI: Yes. [laughter]

MR: Yes, the cheeks of your ass slam shut. The pucker factor was there and we heard it. This happened probably late, late at night. Thank God, it's coming on close to dawn, because, as light started to come, it ended up that what it was was an army of ants moving from one section of the jungle to another section.

SI: Wow.

MR: And the thing is they had gone right through where we were. It was like, oh, man, let me tell you, that sort of got everybody's attention. Another thing that happened--this is going back to when we went into the base camp, a couple of days later--one of my platoons, the Second Platoon, was down to about eleven guys at that time.

The Second Platoon, we sent them out on an ambush. They're out probably one kilometer, six-tenths of a mile, outside the position, outside the battalion position. All of a sudden, I got a call from Second Platoon leader, Willie, Jimmy Williams, "6, this is 2." "This is 6." "This is 2. We've got some movement to our front." "Roger, okay, let me know what develops."

Little bit later, "6, this is 2, we've got movement to our front. Looks like it's going to either side of us." "Roger." Next thing I know, it was, "Click, click," and that means that he can't talk, okay. So, I said, "Do you still have that movement?" "Click," yes. "Is it still in front of you?" "Click." "Is it on your right?" "Click." "Is it on your left?" "Click." I'm going, "Holy shit, here we go. We don't know what's coming in on them."

So, I call up my platoon leaders, the other platoon leaders, and I said, "Okay, guys, get ready to mount up. Get your people ready, because it looks like Willie's going to get hit with something." I call battalion and I said, "Sir, we've got a problem out with the Second Platoon." I said, "You're going to have to fill in my position, because I'm going to go out and get them." He said, "No problem at all. We got it covered." So, all of a sudden, everyone's starting to move.

All of a sudden, I get a call, "6, this is 2." "This is 6--what happened?" "It was monkeys."

SI: Wow.

MR: Yes, it was monkeys moving through the trees. We called it "the monkey ambush." What I thought was amazing about it was the fact that we had heavy action a week before; we had action four days before. We lost a lot of guys.

Now, all of a sudden, these guys are out there, eleven guys are out there all by themselves, out in the middle of nowhere. This is happening and no one fired a weapon, which was amazing. I said the fire discipline of those guys had to be amazing. I mean, it really was--and that was the leadership of Williams and his platoon sergeant. They were just excellent. They had good guys in that platoon, but that was about it.

We did some smaller actions where the platoons got involved and the company got involved, but nothing really big, nothing that caused guys to get killed. Some guys'd get wounded, stuff like that, but, I mean, it wasn't catastrophic, if you want to call it that.

From there (I mean literally), we ended up heading north. The whole brigade up and moved out of Tây Ninh and moved up to Chu Lai, when the Marines who were in Chu Lai (that was a Marine camp), when they moved up to Khe Sanh and up into the I Corps area, all the way up close to the DMZ, yes.

[Editor's Note: During the Vietnam War, South Vietnam was divided into four tactical zones: I Corps, II Corps, III Corps and IV Corps. I Corps, the furthest north and bordering North Vietnam along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), was occupied by the US Marine Corps.]

So, you want me to just continue?

SI: I was going to ask a question about replacements, because you are now talking about bringing in a lot of people to replace those you had lost.

MR: Yes.

SI: This unit was built around the experimental idea of everyone working together from the start.

MR: Train-and-retain, yes.

SI: How did the replacements fit into that, and were they effectively brought in?

MR: It was tough for them, the replacements coming in. First, they didn't have the training. They didn't have the training that our guys did, because, again, they just went through the regular training that other units did. There wasn't resentment, but there was standoffishness, "You're coming in to replace one of my best friends" type thing.

SI: Yes.

MR: One of the things is, the guys pretty much were that way. They'd take care of them, but they weren't going to get close to them for a while, because, first of all, didn't know how long they're going to last, which is a thing, and are they going to get someone else killed?

The brigade had a "Charger Academy," because the 196th was known as the Chargers. They had Charger Academy over there and it was a week of training where new people coming in (the replacements coming in) went to this academy.

It was almost like a camp, where NCOs from the various infantry battalions were assigned. Usually, these NCOs are guys who are wounded, guys who are old, okay, and couldn't keep up with the field anymore. They would go there and train up and teach these new guys coming in how to survive. Basically, that was what it was boiled down to.

It was my first sergeant, (Trimble), and he had to be in his--God, he had to be close to fifty at that time. He said it was "a young man's war." They called me "the old man" and I was twenty-four. And there were maybe six people in the company that were older than me, everyone else was in their early twenties. I just had a couple of NCOs--maybe it was more than that, I figure, at the max, ten--but, again, there wasn't anybody else older.

There was one guy, Field First Sergeant Extram, Pappy Extram. He was a Korean War veteran. and probably in his late thirties. Trimble was probably someplace around fifty and a couple of the other sergeants were probably in their thirties, late twenties, but that was about it.

I say it was a young man's war because it was. When you're out in the field, literally, the temperature in the jungle, with the humidity and everything else like that, the temperature's running about 105, 110 degrees. The humidity was someplace in the 90s.

I mean, my two boys have been over to Qatar; they've been there a couple of times. They're going over to Iraq in, I guess, a couple of weeks. The heat over there, they were talking about, is 110, 115, but it's a dry heat. They have new equipment, right now, which keeps them a little bit cooler, a little bit more insulated than what we had.

Besides you had the heat, you didn't really eat, because you couldn't get that much food when you're out in the field. We used to say that you could tell about some units, how long they're going to be out in the field before they got resupplied by how many socks they had hanging off their web gear, because what you do is, let's say we're going out for, let's say, three days before we're going to get resupplied.

So, you get three days' worth of food. That's one case of C rations, let's say three C ration meals a day. Okay, so, you've got nine C ration meals for three days. You can't carry all of that stuff, simply because of the weight.

So, what most guys would do is open up a C rat and they'd take out one can, maybe; for me, it was ham and lima beans. Not many people liked that; I enjoyed it. Let's say ham and lima beans and maybe a fruit--they stick it into a sock. That may be breakfast. Then, I'd take another can for lunch and another can for dinner, tie it up, put that on my belt--that'd be my meals for one day.

So, you'd be able to tell how many days, literally, the guys are going out for by the amount of cans they carried with them. I know that I went into Vietnam at 210 pounds and I came out at 147.

SI: Wow.

MR: I know most of the guys that I knew that were in the infantry units, they lost thirty percent, twenty-five percent of their weight over there. I know that when I got back, I just ate like a hog for I don't know how many days. A few months later, I was back up to 220 pounds--but, as Pop Trimble said, it was a young man's war.

The other thing he said, too, which is very interesting, he said, "In World War II and Korea," he said, "we had lines. Okay, the front line is here. You're up on the front line for, let's say, two weeks, three weeks, whatever. Then, you're back off the front line. You could relax." He said, "Then, you go back up again. Same thing with Korea, you go up on the line, and then, you come back off the line."

He said, "Here, there wasn't anything like a front line," aside from when you were in the brigade base camp, which wasn't too bad--but, again, there was shelling every once in a while. They'd mortar it, not much, compared to some other units.

When we're up at Chu Lai, my company was about six or seven miles from battalion base camp and we were getting sniped at all the time. You literally didn't know if they're going to mortar you, if they're going to shoot at you. When you went out past the gates on a mission, are you going to be hit immediately? You had no idea. So, it was a mind game.

One of the times when we're up in C Zone, we had gone out. It was a search-and-destroy, find out where the bad guys are, get in a fight, then, battalion'd bring other people in. I guess it was maybe about three o'clock in the afternoon. Our canteens were almost dry.

All of a sudden, we came upon this field of elephant grass. Elephant grass is, I don't know, it's almost razor sharp. It's six, eight feet high and its hell going through it. So, we started off in company column, three platoons in column, with three files in each platoon. We started off with three files. As you're hacking your way through with machetes, you were making very little progress cutting your way through it and using up an awful lot of energy.

I had a battalion commander, we called him "Fifteen Hundred" Coley because he would be up in a CC (command-and-control) helicopter fifteen hundred feet in the air, wanting to know where our position was. First time, I told him where it was and, second time, I told him where it was, because we'd only moved fifty yards in about an hour.

Then, the third time, I said, "You're coming in weak and distorted," the hell with him. I was having a tough enough time with the smoke being popped and people who we didn't want to see it possibly seeing it, which means the VC. So, we just disregarded his radio.

We were moving. I guess we were in the elephant grass for an hour, probably at least an hour. All of a sudden, we heard a duck quacking a short distance away. VC used to put out ducks, tie a string around its foot, stake it to the ground, feed it. I mean, it'd have its own little area, but ducks are very territorial. If they hear something, they'll start quacking.

Ducks did not belong out where we were. There's no reason for ducks being out there. Immediately, everything slowed down. It was a point where we weren't certain if we were going to get hit. We knew they were out someplace out to our right. We started drifting over to the left, trying to move around it. Nothing happened. Nothing happened, but, for that period of time, the mind game was there.

That was one of the things that Trimble said. He said, "The mind game, because you never know when it's going to happen, what is going to happen," he said, "the worst part about Vietnam was the mind game." So, that was pretty much it.

SI: Let me ask another question.

MR: Go ahead, put me on the right track. [laughter]

SI: You talked about the mission where you went to a hospital/bike repair place.

MR: Yes.

SI: Was that in a tunnel or was it a building?

MR: No, they were huts.

SI: Okay.

MR: They were just huts. There weren't any tunnels there, that we knew of. I don't think there were that many tunnels out in C Zone. I think, the tunnels, you're talking like the tunnels of Cu Chi?

[Editor's Note: Cu Chi Base Camp near Saigon, established by the American military, sat atop an extensive underground tunnel network built by the Vietcong.]

SI: Yes.

MR: We had "tunnel rats," [soldiers trained to clear out tunnels]. We came upon tunnels up in Chu Lai, but we didn't come upon tunnels when we were up in C Zone at all.

SI: Okay.

MR: I had a couple of tunnel rats in the company, but there was nothing down in the Tây Ninh area, in C Zone.

SI: Okay.

MR: Chu Lai: when we went up to Chu Lai, we went up there, I think the whole brigade moved out, moved up there in two days. We went up by C-130. We landed in Chu Lai. They put us on trucks and ran us out to our C Company base camp south of Chu Lai. The Marines had a battalion spaced on the Batangan Peninsula, probably about seven, eight miles, ten miles maybe, south of the Chu Lai Air Base.

We went there to replace the Marines. I'll tell you, I could see why the Marines are assault troops. They're not troops to stay in an area, a fixed area, because we were very surprised that their bunkers were not built up. The bunkers they had around this company base camp couldn't stop anything except for maybe a twenty-two-caliber round.

The base camp was on a hill on the edge of the South China Sea, so, literally, it was almost like a cliff. We found out that their mess sergeant was throwing food, the old food, off the side of the hill. So, there was rats and their latrines were really poorly done. I didn't think there was decent leadership in this one company.

The other interesting thing was, when they were moving, leaving, they literally walked out of the company area and were walking the six or eight miles, I guess, back to their battalion area. They handed in their M-14 rifles and they were handed M-16 rifles as they walked out the gate.

So, it was the first time they ever got the M-16s. I'm trying to figure out if that is one of the reasons that the Marines always complained about the M-16, because they were never properly taught how to use them and how to take care of them?

So, when we got up to Chu Lai, we're up on the top of the hill. I had a Marine squad, it was a civic action squad, that was down in a village about a mile from where we were. They were there with a bunch of Regional Forces, militia, if you want to call it that.

So, we met up with them. They ended up loving us, because we were able to give them things that they weren't able to get from their Marines, because the Marines never had them or maybe never gave it to them. We were giving these guys Starlight scopes. We gave them an extra machine-gun. We gave them radios they didn't have.

[Editor's Note: The AN/PVS-2 Starlight scope was a first-generation night vision device that was utilized by American forces during the Vietnam War.]

We fed them. I mean, they were used to eating C rations maybe four days out of five. Well, hell, we're sending hot chow down to them for at least an evening meal, which at least they were able to get some decent food out of there.

SI: Yes.

MR: But, we're up there on the hill. I guess I was up there for three months, April, May, June. At the end of June, I rotated back to the States.

We were able to redo all the bunkers in that time. We ended up putting a couple thousand rounds of rifle ammunition, about two thousand rounds of machine-gun ammunition and a case of grenades, plus claymores, in every bunker. We dug the bunkers the way they're supposed to be. We put in a trench line, trenches going between the bunkers. Yes, that was up in that area.

SI: Yes, I was going to ask.

MR: The company was only supposed to have--well, we used to do a lot of trading. The Marines, if I remember correctly, couldn't drink hard liquor until they're twenty-one. The Army guys could do it at eighteen.

So, I used to "tithe" my platoon leaders, platoon sergeants. Each one would give me ten bucks every pay period. So, we'd get a hundred dollars, 150 dollars, whatever else it was. I'd send in my radio operator and another guy with our resupply convoy run every day. They go into the Chu Lai Base Camp, buy booze, and then, they start trading.

I'd tell Kitchen, "Hey, Greg, we want to get a couple of machine-guns, if you can get them, and see if you can get any more radios." So, he'd come back out with radios and machine-guns, because, hey, it was almost like, let's just say Johnny Walker, a bottle of Johnny Walker, for a PRC-25 radio. That's a good deal, as far as we're concerned.

[Editor's Note: The AN/PRC-25 was a transportable field radio used widely in the Vietnam War.]

The company, again, we're out in the middle of our area of operations, maybe six, seven miles from battalion. We're only supposed to have two eighty-one-millimeter mortars in our company. We were able to trade and now we had three. We weren't supposed to have a sixty-millimeter mortar, but we had a sixty-millimeter mortar. We're only supposed to have five M60 machine-guns; we had thirteen.

We're only supposed to have one radio per platoon; we had three radios per platoon. We're not supposed to have a fifty-caliber machine-gun; we had a fifty-caliber machine-gun. We had a five KW [kilowatt] generator and one-and-a-half KW generators for the mess hall and for the operations bunker.

It was a pretty well-stocked hillside in so far as ammunition was concerned, because we knew that we were going to be on our own if anything happened. We're going to be on our own because it's going to take people time to get to us, if they had to get there.

So, what we would do, we would practice fire missions, firing, let's say--the VC used to try and push *sampans* or boats up the South China Sea. The Marines didn't have anything to be able to see them out there, but we could see them with Starlight scopes. So, what we would do, we'd shoot mortars at them. So, we'd shoot maybe ten mortar rounds, okay, but we requisitioned forty mortar rounds. So, we would have more ammunition.

We just kept building up the ammunition stockpile. That thing that you're just looking at [an after-action report], when the Second Platoon got hit by the VC battalion, my mortar guys put up illumination rounds from about four o'clock in the morning until close to five-thirty in the morning. That was close to ninety minutes. That was three rounds per minute or two rounds per minute; I forget exactly what it was.

SI: Wow.

MR: Our basic load of ammunition was supposed to be something like a hundred high explosive, fifty white phosphorous and fifty illumination, let's say. Those guys fired illumination, they fired close to two hundred rounds of illumination. We weren't supposed to have that much.

The Battalion Commander asked me that morning, he said, "Where the hell did you get all that ammunition?" I said, "Sir, you don't want to know." He said, "You're right, I don't want to know," but it was one of the things that at least helped Willie's platoon. They could see what the hell was going on when the bad guys are coming in on them.

SI: Do you mind if we take a quick break?

MR: No.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We were just talking about, I think it was the Van Tuong battle.

MR: Van Tuong.

SI: Was this your first action where you were defending a hamlet like this or were there others?

MR: We were up there--we were up in Chu Lai, in that base camp--probably for about a month-and-a-half when that took place. We'd been on missions, a couple of company-sized missions. Most of the missions up there were platoon-sized and night ambushes, squad-sized ambushes and platoon-sized night ambushes.

Also, we used to drop off a sniper team. A platoon would go out through a wooded area or over a hill, and there'd be two less guys when they came out the other side. So, it had to be the sniper team. They'd hang around for a while, move at night, try and see what they could find out or whack out some bad guys. Then, they'd be picked up again a couple of days later. So, that was most of our missions there.

The thing with the night of, I guess, May 22nd-23rd, we knew and we're getting indications, little by little, that the VC were planning something. We thought they were planning to hit my company area. The intel wasn't right.

What we had decided to do, prior to that, was to try pacification of a village. It was about--what was it?--two kilometers, I guess it is, from the company base, from my company base camp. The platoon I chose to go down there was the Second Platoon, Jimmy Williams' platoon. We sent them down; it was twenty-six guys. There were twenty-three in the rifle platoon and there were three guys who were in the mortar squad.

They set up in the village with the village chief. The villagers started to help them build up or put a fence around the area or some stuff that Willie wanted. Then, we got the word that the VC were moving in and we weren't ready.

They were supposed to hit that night and we didn't know it. I had one platoon out on what was called a "Bushmaster," which was a platoon-sized ambush operation. It was about two kilometers--I'm looking at the map--it was two kilometers east of the village. Then, it was Willie's platoon is in the village and I'm up on top of the hill with my First Platoon and my mortar platoon.

The attack started around four o'clock in the morning, about five to four in the morning. I got the word out to everybody, to the First Platoon. I told the mortars, I said, "You're on your own." Joe Cavallero was the mortar platoon leader at the time. I said, "Joe, you guys are on your own. We're going down."

It was the First Platoon and my headquarters team; I had Jimmy Smith with me, my XO. He was going with the First Squad of the First Platoon. I told Jimmy, I said, "If you run into any trouble on the way down, you're on your own. We've got to get into Willie's platoon."

Willie, I guess, well, he was being hit by a VC battalion. We knew it was a battalion because he was radioing me saying that they had fifty-seven recoilless rifles that were firing at them and, also, fifty-caliber machine-guns. You don't see that at the VC company level. That's normally a higher unit.

We moved down in a straight line. I wasn't going on any trails or on any roads. I want to get down as quickly as possible. We got shot up by our own helicopters on the way down. They apparently saw someone moving and it was us. They opened fire on us. Thank God, they didn't hit anybody. I told Greg, "Call them and let them know, if they fire again, we're going to open fire on them." They pulled off.

We got into the village; I guess we covered that. I'm trying to think. We pulled out of the company base probably at about five or ten after four, between five and ten after four. I mean, we literally mounted up in ten, fifteen minutes; everybody was ready to go. At around four-thirty, we came through the village.

I just remember going through that village. It was probably one of the most surreal things I ever had in my life. I never had an experience like that, a high that was unbelievable. We're running through the village in a low crouch. There was smoke all over the place. There was colored smoke, regular smoke, from, I guess, Willie had thrown out some smoke grenades. There was green tracer; it was red tracer. It was people screaming. It was kids yelling. Stuff was on fire and you're on an edge between life and death like I've never been on before in my life.

We got in there and, as we're going in, the VC are pulling out. We ended up, I guess Willie had like five killed, I guess it was seventeen guys wounded. It was only three guys in the platoon that could really walk around, that weren't touched. There were other guys that had slight wounds. They could walk around. They could be patched up, but they were still wounded. The village chief was killed. We had a national policeman that was with the platoon. He was killed.

I remember the battalion commander, when he came in, he just looked around. I'll tell you, I had tears in my eyes--I was almost crying. I said, "We lost so many." It looked like an Easter egg hunt, there were so many dud grenades that were there.

One of the bunkers was manned by a guy named Skinner whose name's on the Wall right down here in Holmdel, he was one of the machine-gunners. I'm pretty certain it was his bunker that, when they dug him out, there was no live ammo left. They'd gone through every bit of machine-gun ammunition they had before they finally got killed.

[Editor's Note: Private First Class Donald A. Skinner was killed-in-action on May 23, 1967, near Quang Ngai, South Vietnam. He was assigned to C Company, Fourth Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 196th Infantry Brigade. His name is engraved on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, and on the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Holmdel, New Jersey.]

SI: Wow.

MR: We think they were hit by two fifty-seven-[caliber] recoilless rifles, as well as a fifty-caliber machine-gun. That was probably one fifty. There was a time when I knew the sequence of events for a couple of years after that. All of a sudden, I lost the sequence of events and I lost the time. I don't know what happened to me.

I ended up, for years, and thought that Willie's platoon got hit at midnight, around midnight, and I didn't do anything until four o'clock in the morning. I'll tell you that used to wake me up. My wife will tell you, I used to wake up at night yelling. "What was I doing?" "Why didn't I move quicker?"

It was only when Jim Humphrey, who was writing the story of the battle around 2002, sent the manuscript to my son, Mike, who has the same name as me. He's a junior. He lived up in North Jersey and Mike sent it down to me. All of a sudden, I realized I didn't lose four hours. I had not screwed up.

I had not screwed up the way I thought I had screwed up. I know that I had been with psychologists, going through that night, reliving it and trying to figure out what the hell happened--but, when Humphrey sent that manuscript, that was the thing that resolved everything. Then, all of a sudden, "Holy good God!!" I called up one of my best friends at that time, a guy by the name of Roger Harding, and I said, "Roger, I found the four hours. I found the four hours." I was crying.

SI: Wow.

MR: That was something. That was the last major stuff that we had. Later, we had one guy come into the company, I think his name was Robinson, he came in, thirty-seven-year-old guy, wanted to serve his country. He was with us for a week and he died. He died. He tripped a booby trap and he ended up dying.

The last action I was on was the night or the morning of the day I left. Again, it was one of the villages where we knew that the VC were coming in; same unit was coming in. It was the 48th VC Sapper Battalion. They were the guys who we're going against up there. We left the company base at two o'clock in the morning, got in position at four o'clock in the morning, and had a nice ambush set up. The VC came in probably about five.

We had a little bit of a knockdown drag out. I think I had two guys wounded; no one was killed. I think we killed two or three of them, but we found a tunnel complex. When the VC pulled out, we started going after them and we found a tunnel complex. We weren't prepared for it. We always carried some C4 around with us, but never enough to hit anything like this.

My tunnel rats went down into it and it became a lot more extensive than we thought it was. We were told to stay there until they could get an engineer unit in to blow it up. Maybe two or three

hours later, I guess, by the time it went from me to battalion, it went up to brigade, brigade decided they're going to take care of it the next day or send someone else in.

They told me, they said, "Charlie 6, this is Slugger 3," which is the operations officer. He said, "Bring your guys back to base camp. By the way, pack up--you're going home." I sang *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* over the battalion command net, I want to tell you.

My replacement had been with me for a week. I'd been filling him in on stuff, transferring stuff over to him and everything else like that. A couple of stories about up at Chu Lai and especially about my replacement--he was a guy coming in from the States, had never been in Vietnam before. One of the things you do at a change of command is to sign over the property book of the unit's equipment. You sign off for jeeps, machine-guns, this, that and everything else.

So, we were short what they call an anti-intrusion device. It's a little thing about the size of a pack of cigarettes. It was OD [olive drab] in color, had a nylon filament that you stretched out, so, if someone/something broke the nylon filament or rubbed against it, either a tiny, little light went on or a little buzz went off, so that you knew that someone was coming.

So, it was one of those things we're missing. I'd already talked to battalion S-4, the battalion supply officer, Dave Decker. He said, "Hey, next time you're out in the field, Mike, just write it off and we'll take it off the property book." "Yes, no problem."

Well, this guy, he was giving me trouble. I said, "I already talked to Decker," who was the S-4. I said, "Dave said, 'All you got to do is, next time out in the field, just write it off,' and he'll take care of it, no problem." He said, "Well, I don't know if I can sign for it."

I said, "Then, I'm going to have to get rid of some of my excess." He said, "What do you have excess? What do you mean excess?" "Oh, I've got a jeep trailer, I've got a fifty-caliber machine-gun, I've got an eighty-one-millimeter mortar." This is all the stuff that I've been accumulating. All of a sudden, "No, no, okay, okay."

Then, I found out from guys at a reunion, one of the reunions we had, that he only lasted about a month-and-a-half. He was also relieved. He was also relieved. He got a couple of guys killed stupidly, which is how many guys got killed. It's tough enough you get killed in action, but to get killed stupidly, like those guys on the bunker.

The company area that we had in the South China Sea, like I said, was up on a hill. This is one of the decent things about it, anyway. It looked over a nice little cove. So, what we would do when we didn't have any big operations going on and things were relatively quiet, one platoon would be in the base camp, the company base camp, one platoon would be securing the area around the cove and the other platoon would be swimming in the cove. So, they'd be able to swim.

I mean, the water was like in the eighties. The sand was something that Conrad Hilton would give his right arm for, because it was so smooth and so beautiful. We also had a surfboard in the

company area. The Marines left it for us. There wasn't any surf, but it looked cool. You could stand there with a surfboard in the South China Sea. [laughter]

So, I remember, when they told me that I was going back in, the company went back in, I started packing up my stuff. We had the change of command ceremony with the new guy. I was getting ready to get in my jeep and Greg was getting ready to take me back to battalion.

All of a sudden, I got a call, "Hey, 6, you'd better get down to the beach." I go, "What's up?" "Can't tell you, but it doesn't look good." So, I go down to the beach. What they did, when I pulled in was my first sergeant and a couple of the guys come over to the jeep and they grabbed me.

They took my wallet out and threw me into the South China Sea which I thought was cool. I mean, ass, everything, everything went in. Thank God, they pulled my wallet out, but that was it. I went back to battalion and stayed that night in battalion. Next day, I was down at Long Binh, at the airport.

I remember we were supposed to be woken up at three o'clock in the morning to get the plane at four. Three o'clock, they told us, "Hey, there's been a delay." We started drinking with a whole bunch of guys there, officers and NCOs, guys that I served with, a bunch of guys from the brigade, a bunch of guys. I know that we probably went through about three cases of beer before about five o'clock.

They finally loaded us on to a bus and brought us out to the airport. As we were walking towards the plane, one of the guys, it was quiet, you could hear one guy just say, "God, don't mortar us now," and that was it. We got on the plane, wrapped blankets around us. Some guys were passing bottles of booze back and forth, up and down the aisle. We were headed home, headed home, and that was the end of my tour.

SI: Wow.

MR: There's probably stuff in there that I've missed or stuff I've glossed over.

SI: Yes. Let me ask some general questions and maybe that will jog some more memories.

MR: Okay.

SI: You mentioned the Marine Corps unit that you replaced was, I think you said civic engagement or something like that.

MR: A Civic Action Platoon.

SI: Yes.

MR: No, we didn't replace them. They were...

SI: They were there, okay.

MR: They were there and they stayed there.

SI: Would you have to do much in the way of the "hearts and minds" campaign? Did you have much interaction with the civilians?

MR: No.

SI: No, okay.

MR: Well, down at C Zone, we had no interaction with civilians, because we were out in C Zone all the time. Up in Chu Lai, we had interaction with the village right at the bottom of the hill where we were. There was a village down there. We interacted all the time with the people there. Matter of fact, they gave us haircuts and everything else along those lines. The guys were able to get some beer from them, and so forth.

When we're out on company sweeps, especially company sweeps, not so much platoon sweeps, and we'd have the medics with us. So, we'd go into a village (and there weren't that many villages in the area), we'd go into the village and treat some of the people, almost like a MEDCAP, a mini MEDCAP [Medical Civic Action Program].

We did not announce them, because, if we announced them, there was always a possibility the VC would be waiting for us, or ambush us. So, we didn't want to do that, but that was the main interaction that we had with the people. I mean, the people up there, the people up at Chu Lai, all the hell they wanted to do was just farm. They just wanted, "Just leave us alone and let us take care of our families."

A big treat that I got, shortly after we got to Chu Lai, the village chief, who lives at the bottom of the hill, invited us down for dinner with his family and some of the village elders. They served us potatoes, not rice, potatoes, which is something they thought was special, crawfish and potatoes, okay. There were good people. We had a couple of Vietnamese that worked with the company.

SI: Civilians?

MR: They were former VC, the Chieu Hois.

[Editor's Note: The Chieu Hoi program promoted defection from the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong from 1963 to 1971.]

SI: Okay, yes.

MR: They were good, they were very good. We enjoyed working with them. So, that was pretty much the interaction.

SI: Yes.

MR: That was the interaction that we had with them.

SI: You said the former VC people were from the Chieu Hoi program.

MR: There was two of them that we had.

SI: Yes. It sounds like, in a lot of the actions you took part in, you would confront the enemy, and then, either leave or they leave.

MR: Yes.

SI: Did you have to take any prisoners, or were prisoners a constant concern?

MR: We didn't get prisoners down in C Zone. We got prisoners up in Chu Lai. We got one prisoner, we caught him, we sent him back in. About a month later, we got him again. Okay, we sent him back in, supposedly to a POW camp, whatever the hell they did with them. Then, the guy showed up again. When the guy showed up the third time, he didn't show up anymore.

So, that was about it; all told, probably about four or five prisoners all during the time up at Chu Lai, nothing big. The VC pulled all their wounded and all their dead back, for the most part.

If there were wounded on the battlefield, they'd take them back with them, especially down in the village, because, down in the village, when they came through the fence (through the fences and the other stuff), when they withdrew, they also took the wounded with them. They left many dead there, or left most of the dead there, I guess. They took a lot with them, too.

SI: Given how close you were with your men and the concept that the light brigade was trying to fulfill, do you think it was effective in the end? Do you think it was the right way to go?

MR: With the...

SI: Yes, the whole concept of training all together and going over together.

MR: Yes, and it's one of the things they almost do now. I mean, units train to go over to, let's say, Afghanistan, or a unit will go over to Afghanistan for six months, like the Marines. Then the whole unit would come back and another unit would go in. This way, you keep unit integrity.

There's good points and bad points to that. The good point is that you keep unit integrity. People know what's going on. The bad point is that you finally learned the area, your AO (area of operations), and now you're gone. You finally know all the people--the village chiefs, police chiefs, whoever else there might be--and, now, you're gone.

In Vietnam I was rotated out after six months in Charlie Company. The new guy had to come in and learn all over what I had learned. So, it was like the constant relearning curve, whereby, in

World War II, they just kept throwing replacements in. You're pretty much with the unit until the unit either came back in out of the field, the unit was decimated or the war ended.

The train-and-retain, my boys like it--they're both infantry officers. They're both infantry captains. They like it because they're going to be deploying with the troops that they know and they're going to be there for a set amount of time. So, they're going to know that these guys are going to be with them for this whole period of time. They're not going to be moving troops in and out.

The train-and-retain worked for us and it's working now. Good points, bad points, it depends what the guys up on top, what they think, in the Pentagon, but, yes, that's all I got on that one. That's all I got on that one, Shaun.

SI: Okay. You mentioned last time that you went to Hawaii on your R&R.

MR: Yes.

SI: Did you get any other R&Rs or just that one?

MR: No, just that one. We tried--myself and the First Sergeant tried to make certain the guys got a second R&R, for the kids, for the riflemen, especially the platoons that got hit a lot. We'd do that, either in-country R&R or getting them out to Thailand, to Hong Kong, someplace like that.

Most of the officers and senior NCOs had their wives and spouses meet them out in Hawaii, basically what it boiled down to. Fort Derussy was a rollicking place the first night guys got in there, let me tell you.

[Editor's Note: Fort Derussy is a military reservation at Waikiki Beach in Honolulu, Hawaii.]

SI: Yes.

MR: It was an old World War II barracks. You didn't have any insulation between the rooms, all you had was boards and a piece of two-by-four, and then, it'd be beds, let's say a double bed. It was not like a hotel room.

When you get a bunch of horny GIs coming to see their wives for the first time, five, six months, seven, eight months, something else like that, there was a lot of noise, a lot of noise in that building. That was a good time.

SI: You were there in what we now see as the earlier phase of the war.

MR: Yes.

SI: What I have heard is, a lot of the issues that people talk about in relation to Vietnam, like race relations and drug use, their impact was felt more later, but would you say that there was any impact when you were there?

MR: The only drug I know of was marijuana.

SI: Okay.

MR: Okay, not in the field. A couple of times I smelled it when we came in out of the field and the guys were settling down. The main thing over there was booze. As far as race relations is concerned, you didn't find that as much in the line units as you did in the rear echelon units or the support units. The main reason is that in the line units, you had to depend on the guys. In the rear units, in the supply units, you had spare time on your hands. We really didn't.

You talk race relations--I told you about the sniper team. Well, sniper teams had to be two guys that had to get along well together, because you're out with the guy for three, four days and no one else around, just you and him.

My sniper team was a guy by the name of Royce Rasnic from Florida; no, not Florida, I think he was down from Mississippi. He eventually retired to Florida. He was a six-foot-two white guy, big guy, big kid. His sniper partner was a guy by the name of Shorty Matthews, a little black kid, maybe about five-eight, five-nine, from Chicago. This is 1965, '66, '67, and these guys did not have a problem at all. They really didn't.

I know, later on, from guys I know who were over there and came back, they didn't talk about it much in the line units. There was some, they said, and there was the stuff, wearing the peace sign and this, that and the other thing.

There was probably more dope going on and stuff like that, but I was not aware of it, which doesn't mean it didn't happen. It's just that I was not aware of it. The First Sergeant and the NCOs were smart enough to be able to come upon that and it was never a problem. No, that wasn't a problem for us.

SI: Okay. Did you ever run into any antiwar sentiment among the men?

MR: When we came back.

SI: Okay, that is it.

MR: No, everyone thought war sucked. [laughter]

SI: Yes.

MR: One of the things that's always amazed me is the fact--and, again, we talked with Willie's platoon-- he had twenty-five guys down there that were being hit by a VC battalion, two hundred, almost three hundred VC. So, he was outnumbered ten-to-one. When I got the word of the attack, my job was, "Okay, we've got to take care of them."

So, I cranked up the First Platoon. No one said a word about, "Holy shit, we've got to go down there? We got to do this?" No one said a word. Everyone just packed up and started heading south, heading for the village.

I guess I talk to my guys when we get together at reunions--every two years, various places in the country. My company, Charlie Company, our guys are dying out right now, I mean, we've had upwards of thirty guys at one of these reunions and, now, we're down to maybe ten or fifteen--but one of the things they always said, there wasn't any doubt in their mind what they had to do.

They remember that and half of them were draftees, half of them were volunteers. None of these guys have said, "I wish I had never gone. It's the worst thing that ever happened to me," and I'm talking about guys with no legs.

SI: Wow.

MR: Guys that they said, "No," they said, "I was where I was supposed to be. I have no qualms about having been called up." Now, I'm not stupid. I mean, there's other guys out there that don't want anything to do with it, but I guess it depends upon the units that you were in. Again, like the long-range recon guys, I mean, you're talking about my friend Emil Philobosian, they're so tight, it's unbelievable.

SI: Yes.

MR: Because that's the way they were.

SI: I am curious, the people that come to the reunions, are they mostly people who were part of the whole training cycle for the full year?

MR: We have both.

SI: It was both, okay.

MR: We've got what we call "the boat people" and "the replacements." There's kidding that goes on back and forth--sometimes, it's not kidding. The boat people looking at, "Yes, well, you guys didn't know what it was like." "Oh, you guys didn't know what it was like," because the guys that came in afterwards, there was some real heavy action, real heavy action that went on, that a lot of guys got wiped out--but it's probably almost a fifty-fifty split.

SI: Okay.

MR: Between the boat people, who were always closer, because they knew each other, and then, the replacements came in. So, you didn't know that many guys, but after coming to reunions for a period of time, all of a sudden they got to know each other. So, everyone pretty much clicks together now.

Like, they always have a dinner on Saturday night, the last night of the reunion, and our company always gets together, guys who came in in '68, '69, '70, with the guys that were there in '66, '67. I mean, we'll have maybe five tables together of guys and their wives.

SI: Wow.

MR: So, the camaraderie's pretty good.

SI: Okay.

MR: I don't know where you want to go with this, Shaun, but one of the big things, coming back, a lot of the guys were lost, because they had no place to go. I mean, I was lucky I had the Army. I was still in the Army for another year, but a lot of the guys would come back and they'd take off the uniform.

They'd be in Vietnam one day; three days later, they'd be in the States with their uniform off, with their families. In World War II, you at least had where you're either still in Europe, the Army of Occupation, or you came back by troopship.

SI: Yes.

MR: So, you had some time to decompress. Most of these kids didn't have any time to decompress. That was one of the reasons that you hear about the PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], because there wasn't anyone to talk to. I was lucky, because I came back to Fort Monmouth and almost everyone there, even though it was a signal school, all the company commanders, all the company-level officers, were all infantry captains and infantry majors.

We ended up almost like having therapy sessions. We'd go out for beers or something else like that and you'd just start talking about stuff, but, I mean, it was just like therapy for the most part; same thing when I was in the Guard and in the Reserves.

When I came out of the Reserves, my wife will tell you, I always used to have a problem sleeping. When I came out of the Reserves, it was in '93. By '95, she said I was all over the place at nighttime, she would not go to bed with me until four or five o'clock in the morning, until I'm physically exhausted. I'd spent [the night] thrashing around.

I ended up seeing a psychologist, Al Krass. He was a psychologist in the Army in Korea. I went to see him and it was one of the best things I did. From there, I ended up getting into the VA [Veterans Affairs]. After that is when I found about Humphries.

SI: Okay.

MR: That helped me a lot, and then I got into the VA. I started applying for VA benefits. I hadn't applied for it at that time because, as many of us said, "Hey, the other guys need it more than we did." People were telling us, "Well, you need it more than the other guys did."

In the VA system in the State of New Jersey, you can go to a psychiatrist for two years for free as a veteran. I was able to go to a guy by the name of Sean Evers down in Manasquan, New Jersey.

He did an awful lot, helped me an awful lot, and helped me resolve some of the stuff I had, because the only things that really got to me was Hulse when he died in my arms, and then the Second Platoon with the four hours, where'd the four hours go? All the other stuff, I never had any qualms about what I did or the decisions I made over there.

I used to have a prayer every time I got a mission and I presented the operations order to my guys. I used to say, "God, give me the strength to do the right thing and my men the strength to carry it out." I mean, you couldn't do anything else but that.

SI: Yes.

MR: But, that was the way it was.

SI: Yes. When did you start feeling what you later identified as symptoms of PTSD? Was it while you were still in Vietnam? Was it a little bit after you came home?

MR: Well, when I was in Vietnam, in the beginning, I thought I was really hot shit. I was a pretty good company commander. I was pretty good--I'm not going to say great--I was a pretty good company commander. You almost think that you're invincible when stuff happens. All of a sudden, I got hit.

So, when I came out of the hospital--I was in the hospital for about two weeks--when I came out of the hospital, I went back out in the field. From that point up until the time I left (and that was about five months), after an action, the adrenaline surge would drop off and I would get the shakes. Just a little at first and they would steadily build up until the time I left.

The other thing that happened was, I would get the order from the Battalion S-3 or the Battalion Commander, the operations order. I'd go back and I'd develop my own operations order. Then, I'd get that operations order to my platoon leaders. Then, it's like a dead space between the time that I gave them the operations order and the time we're going to move out. All of a sudden, in the beginning, I just started feeling stomach problems and I would start to feel queasy.

SI: Yes.

MR: Towards the end--and Greg will tell you about this, he's the only guy that knew about it--after I gave that operations order to my platoon leaders, platoon sergeants, I would literally throw up. However, that never affected my ability during my operations in the field. The minute we crossed the LD (line of departure), I mean, I was on. The minute the first round was fired, I mean, I was just constantly going--training and everything else took over, you know what you had to do, and you did it.

Then, when we came back in out of the field, all of a sudden, then, the adrenaline dropped. "Whoosh," you're living on adrenaline--all of a sudden, the adrenaline's gone. So, you end up

getting the shakes, is what it boiled down to, but that was the beginning of it. We used to talk about this when I got back to Fort Monmouth with the guys there.

It was almost all of the guys were experiencing something along the same lines. They maybe reacted a little bit different, with different guys, but, I mean, it was basically the come-down from the adrenaline. Also, I guess there's a little bit of fear that was building up before you went out, again, "Am I doing the right thing? Am I making the right choices? What's going to happen?" type thing.

SI: You mentioned praying. Did you also go to services while you were over there?

MR: Yes, when we could, yes.

SI: Okay.

MR: Yes, we had, I told you, Father Gianitasio. We had a Jewish chaplain, I think two Protestant chaplains and a Catholic chaplain--that's Father Gianitasio. Chaplain Rosen I think was the Jewish chaplain, if that was the name or not. With the 21st Infantry, we had a first lieutenant or captain chaplain who got killed. His name was William Feaster. He was the first chaplain killed in Vietnam.

When we were down at Chu Lai, we had a chapel down there. So, you could get down there and go to the chapel, if there were chapel services and we happened to be there. Sometimes, the chaplains would come out in the field. Father G came out and did Mass off the hood of a jeep. Protestant chaplain came out, guys would go, didn't make any difference, Catholics, Protestants, almost everybody went.

Funny story, we had one chaplain, a Protestant chaplain, and he came out one time with one of our supply runs. This is when we're up at Chu Lai. So, as I told you before, we used to have night ambushes. You send out a squad, seven or eight guys would go out, go out a mile or so, set up an ambush, come back in the next day.

Well, the Chaplain comes out with the resupply convoy, which comes out at the end of the day with food for the next day. Then, the next morning, we'd send in another convoy--so, two jeeps and a three-quarter-ton truck. They go back into battalion and then come out in the afternoon with the food and ammunition, whatever else we need.

So, anyway, Chaplain comes out and he says, "Hey, Mike, I just want to come out, just talk to the troops." "Hey, no problem, Father." I think, if I'm calling him "Father" and he wasn't a Catholic chaplain, he must've been Episcopalian. Okay, anyway, he's there, "What do you got going on?" I said, "Nothing much."

I said, "I've got an ambush going out tonight and I've got such-and-such tomorrow. So, why don't you hang around tonight? Tomorrow morning, you can have breakfast with us and go back in from there, unless you want to stay out for a day."

He said, "No, I'll go back in tomorrow," he said, "but what's with the ambush?" I said, "Oh, just going out, just seven guys going out." "Can I go out with them?" "Father, I'd prefer you wouldn't." He said, "Oh, come on, Mike, let me see what the guys do. This is what I'm supposed to do." "Oh, shit." So, "Okay, all right, Father, you can go out with them."

"Detweiler, Sergeant Detweiler, come here." "Yes, sir." "Mount up your platoon. You guys are going out on an ambush tonight." "What?" [laughter] I said, "No, Chaplain wants to go out. I can't let him out with six guys, man. You guys have got to..." So, we had one platoon protecting the Chaplain and one squad conducting the ambush. [laughter]

SI: Wow.

MR: So, anyway, he was so happy. The guys weren't happy there. The next morning, they came in. They understood what the hell it was, that you just bite the bullet, but the Chaplain was happy he went out. He showed me he had a little snubbed-nose thirty-eight. He had his own weapon, a snubbed-nose thirty-eight.

SI: Oh, wow.

MR: It wasn't going to do much, but, I mean, hey, yes. Some of the other things, I mean, there's always some moments that are not so funny. When an ambush was going out, the patrol leader, before they go out through the wire (go out past the lines), he's going down checking, "Okay, we've got the radio?" "Radio." "Extra battery?" "Extra battery over here."

"Okay, claymores, how many we got?" "Okay, Nickels, you got one, Myers, you got one, okay, Smith, you got one. Okay, good, we got that," going down through the various things needed. Then, "Okay, everybody jump up and down," they jump up and down to make certain nothing rattles.

"Toilet paper, who got toilet paper?" because most of the guys had the runs. So that was one of the big things that you needed out in the field was toilet paper. Yes, that was always on one of the checklists, toilet paper, make certain the guys had it.

SI: It sounds like you were mostly running up against Vietcong units.

MR: Yes.

SI: Did you ever run up against a North Vietnamese Army unit?

MR: No, not that we know of.

SI: Okay.

MR: The Ninth VC Division was really a main force unit. It wasn't the locals. We never really ran into the local forces that much, aside from the guys who maybe sniped at us, but, normally, any type of platoon or company actions that we were in were against main force units.

The 48th VC was a sapper battalion and they were pretty good. They had done a job on the Marines two years before we got there. The Marines had some real serious battles on the Batangan Peninsula, where we were, but, no, we never hit any NVA.

SI: Okay.

MR: The guys, later on in '68, they hit NVA units. They were a little further north from where we were, but they ended up hitting NVA units.

SI: Yes.

MR: Yes, we were lucky. One of the other things, too, was interesting. At one of the reunions, one of the guys, Frenchie, one of my riflemen, told me that they found out, like two months afterwards, that when they attacked Willie's platoon, they had an L-shaped ambush set up on the main trail going between the village at the base of our hill and the village of Le Thuy.

The VC were waiting for us to come down that trail to relieve the Second Platoon, but instead of going this way, with the road, which was the easiest way, we ended up going straight through the rice paddies. So, we didn't hit the ambush, but they were waiting for us. So, that was luck? Who knows? Just go this way, go that way, go the other way, and different stuff happens.

SI: Yes.

MR: We were supposed to be out there (myself and Greg Kitchen were supposed to be out there) that night. I was back in the battalion, because I went into battalion one day a week mainly for the battalion commander's meeting. We talked operations, logistics, plans, our needs, etc.

When I was coming back out on the helicopter to where my company base was, there was a helipad there. It was big enough for one helicopter. So, I'm flying in, getting ready to go out on the resupply chopper that was going down to Willie's platoon. Greg Kitchen was going to meet me and Jack Gominiak, my FO, and the other HQ guyss.

What happened was, though, as I'm coming in, the resupply chopper is already down for Willie's platoon. So we had to hold off until the resupply chopper went out. My chopper came down. I called up Willie, said, "Hey, Willie, can't make it tonight. I'll see you tomorrow night."

That was the night that he got hit. So, again, we would've been down there in the village at that time. So, who knows what?

SI: Wow.

MR: Like I said, minutes and inches and seconds are vital.

SI: Wow. We can come back to Vietnam at any time, but...

MR: Go ahead.

SI: Tell me about that last year on active duty. You were at Fort Monmouth the whole time. What were your assignments there?

MR: Well, I was a company commander in a signal company. I was initially supposed to be an instructor, a combat arms instructor in the signal school, because that's where signal officers learned about the Army, right after commissioning.

The reason I ended up at Monmouth is because I was supposed to have gone to Fort Knox, Kentucky, when they thought I was an armor officer. That was the long-term plan, but, all of a sudden, now that my time's up, I'm now an infantry officer. They said, "Hey, you can either go to Knox or you can go to Fort Monmouth."

I said, "Fort Monmouth, where's that?" I didn't even know where it was. "Oh, it's in New Jersey. It's in New Jersey, near Long Branch, New Jersey." Well, I knew Long Branch from living in Jersey City, but I didn't know much about it. They said, "Yes, it's down near Long Branch, New Jersey." I said, "Well, yes."

The reason I said, "Yes, I'll go there," is because, when I was in Vietnam, my mother had a double mastectomy. She had cancer, she had a double mastectomy, and she'd almost died. I just wanted to be someplace near her. Again, at the time, I was married. When I left for Vietnam, I had a three-year-old son. My first son had been born just before that. So, Monmouth seemed like a good place to be.

So, I went to Monmouth as an infantry officer, supposedly in the school, teaching new officers. When I got there, as I said, every company-grade officer was infantry. All the slots were filled up. So, I ended up being a signal company commander of trainees. They were literally like basic trainees.

There was about five hundred people in the company. I had a daytime cadre of about twenty people. I had about twenty-five instructors who taught in the evening. All my students, about four hundred, were night students, because Fort Monmouth, at the time, was operating literally twenty-four hours a day.

SI: Yes.

MR: We were cranking students out. There were about eight hundred to nine hundred kids who went to school at night, plus you had kids going in the evening, plus kids going in the day. So, I mean, literally, it was almost like twenty-four/seven, pretty close to it.

So, I had H (Hotel) company. My first sergeant was a guy named First Sergeant Jesus Sierra Cabeza. He was from Puerto Rico and he was a character, I want to tell you. He used to go outside and check the height of the grass when the guys were supposed to mow it. It had to be two inches, and he would lay into them if it wasn't.

The main reason was, "Okay, I'm telling you to do this. If you take shortcuts, that means you're going to take shortcuts if you get some other place. I tell you to do something, it has to be exactly what I tell you when I tell you. Then, you've got to do it." So, anyway, Jesus Sierra Cabeza and I got along very, very well.

I called the Pentagon in Washington and I'm talking to, I guess, a major down there in the infantry branch. He said I was supposed to get the instructor position but they've got me at the school. I was originally told, when I was going to Monmouth as an instructor, I was going to be there for two years.

I figured, "Okay, there for two years, go back to Vietnam. I'll probably be a major by that time. I'd be a brigade staff, battalion staff, or I'm going to go to the officer career course--okay, no problem. The career course was down in Fort Benning, and then, go wherever I'm going to go from there." Again, I was going to stay in for my twenty years. I'd already had over four years in.

So, when I called them up, I said, "Listen, I'm not going to be an instructor anymore. They've got me as a student company commander." They said, "Oh? Okay, Captain, let me get back to you." So, he got back to me a couple of days later. I said, "Well, what'd you find out?" He said, "Well, we're going to be sending you back to Vietnam in eight months."

I said, "What do you mean you're going to be sending me back in eight months, sir?" He said, "Well, we need infantry captains over there." I said, "Sir, I already commanded two companies over there. I was told I'm going to be back for two years. I realize I'm going to go back after those two years, but this is eight months."

I just found out my wife was pregnant and I said, "my wife's pregnant. I just bought a house with every penny I had." I said, "Can't you leave me here?" "No, Captain, you don't understand. We need you over there because we need people with experience."

I said, "Excuse me, sir, why can't they get experience the same way I did?" "Captain, you're going over there." I said, "No, sir, I'm not." I said, "I'm a voluntary indefinite officer. I am not Regular Army." I said, "I am getting out of the Army." I waited one year, waited one year stateside, and I got out of the Army. I got out of the Army at the end of June 1968, and began work for Chase Manhattan Bank.

Yes, I just didn't like the way the whole thing was handled. It's funny, I talked to other guys who were RIF-ed (reduction-in-force). Okay, Vietnam is over in '73, Vietnam is over. Now, they're reducing the force.

A friend of mine who had a high school education went in the Army. He went to OCS [Officer Candidate School], became an infantry officer. On his second tour in Vietnam, he went back as a helicopter pilot, slicks. He was flying the Hueys, Huey lift ships, not the gunships. Third tour in Vietnam, he's going back as a gunship pilot. So, he put his tours in.

All of a sudden, there is a reduction-in-force, "We don't need you anymore, Captain. Okay, you're gone." "Sir, what?" "Nope, you don't have a college education. We don't need you." "Sir, I've got a college education. I got the college education on the GI Bill when I came back." "Sorry, son, you're gone." That was in '74.

In '77, they called him up, "We need we're looking for helicopter pilots. Would you be willing to come back on active duty?" He said, "Kiss my ass." He stayed in the Reserves. Guy's name was Tony Romano and he lives out in Fountain Valley, California. No, the Army did not do well by an awful lot of people at that time.

SI: In that last period, did you see a change in the military at all, as the strain of Vietnam started to set in? It sounds like there were manpower issues.

MR: Yes, there was manpower issues that were going to be there, let's say, a little further out, because, don't forget, '68 is when stuff started to go downhill.

SI: Yes.

MR: There was some increase in disciplinary problems, but really not much, until after I got out. I joined the Guard in '72 and you could see the difference between what it was like when I left in '68 and what the soldiers were like in the Guard, and even some of the active-duty soldiers that we saw. It was a big change.

In '68, it was starting to happen--and, again, you're talking Fort Monmouth. The officers, you really didn't have that much of a problem with, and the soldiers, the enlisted men, were all just in the service. So, they were just getting used to the service. They hadn't been in for, let's say a year or two years, or something else like that, when they started getting--not disenfranchised. What do I want to say?

SI: Disenchanted?

MR: Yes, disenchanted, disillusioned.

SI: How did the opportunity to go to Chase come about?

MR: Through my forward observer, Jack Gominiak. When we got back from Vietnam, he was getting married and his wife was the niece of a vice president at Chase Manhattan Bank. I was in Jack's wedding and at the rehearsal dinner and at the wedding, I met Anne Marie's uncle and hit it off.

He told me about this program that Chase Manhattan was doing. It was called the Career Development Program. It was a mid-management development program and they were looking for military officers in the ranks of captains. The reason was because of our training, discipline, leadership, etc., etc., or the management skills, whatever you want to call it. So, I ended up going to Chase Manhattan.

I was living in Middletown, New Jersey, at the time, learned about taking the train up to New York City. It was in downtown New York at the Chase Manhattan Plaza, right where the World Trade Center was. I was there from about '68 to '72, probably about four or five years.

The guys I was with were primarily Army, few Air Force, one Navy guy. We had one girl on the program, too, Ellie Ciarelli. She was a doll. She was not in the service but was just very attractive and very, very smart. [laughter]

I think that was a good thing that they wanted to do. The program was a rotation program through bank operations. I ended up in international operations. At the time, I think I was the second youngest guy to be promoted to Assistant Treasurer in Chase Manhattan Bank for bank operations, which was pretty cool at the time.

SI: Wow.

MR: Yes, I stayed there until, I guess, '72, '73, when I got an offer from a bank in Jersey to head up their human resources. That was the Community State Bank in Linden. I was working seven-hour days at Chase Manhattan Bank, but I was traveling five-and-a-half, six hours a day. So, I mean, it was like I leave my house at six-thirty in the morning, get to work at nine, between eight-thirty and nine, and leave at five o'clock at night and get home seven-thirty. I had two children at the time and another one on the way. So, I was missing family life.

SI: Yes.

MR: Working at the Community State Bank was only a half-hour up the road, so that wasn't bad at all. I was there for a few years. Then, there was a change in leadership at the bank. It was a small bank and there was a change in leadership with the chairman and the board. The guy who recruited me for the bank was not on the right side; he was on the wrong side.

SI: Okay.

MR: They didn't tell me to leave--they didn't even suggest I leave--but I could see that my time was numbered. So I ended up working with a headhunter for about a year-and-a-half. Then, I found out that Fort Monmouth was looking for someone with a personnel background. I ended up applying for and getting the job down there. So, I was down there from '75 up to 2000.

SI: You said 1972 was when you joined the Guard.

MR: Yes.

SI: Why did you do that?

MR: I missed the military.

SI: Okay.

MR: I got out in '68 and went into the Reserves in probably the beginning of '69. It was the 78th Division. It was the unit in Kearny, where the old shipyard used to be, the old Western Electric plant that used to be right on Route 9. I was there for a year.

I liked working with the soldiers, but I ended up getting tired of the bullshit. There was a lot of make-work and make-stuff. For example--I'm trying to get the dates right now--there was some big sporting event going on, I think the Super Bowl with the Jets. I told my guys, "Listen, if we get all the work done, we'll bring in some televisions and we'll watch the event." Guys broke their chops, got everything done we're supposed to do.

We're watching the game when all of a sudden I got a call, "Come down to the Battalion Commander's office." Go down to the Battalion Commander's office, "Yes, sir." "Why are your people watching television?"

I said, "Well, sir, we got all our work done," and I told him that I told my soldiers that "If we get all the work done and we're squared away and we're ready for annual training, and so forth," I said they'd be able to take a break and watch the game.

He said, "We can't have that." I said, "Why not, sir? They've done everything they're supposed to do." "Well, the other units can't do it." I said, "I can't help what the other units do or don't do." I said, "This is what my guys..." So, I got my butt chewed out. I had to go back up and we had to turn off the televisions. I just said, "I don't need this."

It's like someone said one time when I used to have my companies. The guys used to say, "Hey, sir, we're better than B Company." I said, "No," I said, "I don't care if we're better than B Company." I said, "If B Company is a bunch of dirtballs and we're a little bit better than them, then, we're just a little bit better dirtball than they are."

I said, "Okay, here's the standard," because everything in the Army used to be "task, condition and standard." "Here's the task, condition and standard. Did we meet them? Did we exceed them? Okay, that's what we look at. We don't look at, 'Okay, hey, we only did so many of them, yes, but we did it better than this company.' No, we still didn't succeed." It was the same thing.

At Fort Devens, Massachusetts, at A Company, 21st Infantry, when we had something to do, we got it done correctly as soon as we could. This is when John B. Wadsworth was the battalion commander, and he understood what I said before. So, if we had something we had to get done, we got it done. So, now, we've got about two to three hours left in the afternoon. What are we going to do?

I'd send the guys into the woods. Our barracks are here, the street was here and there were woods on the other side. I'd tell the guys, "Go in the woods. Platoon sergeants take all the guys into the woods." All they'd do is lay down, relax and rest. If anybody asked me what they were doing, they were just "practicing reconnaissance" in the woods.

The Battalion Commander knew I was doing it and he knew the other guys were doing it, too. The main thing was, he was keeping battalion or brigade from saying, "Hey, how come your

guys are in the woods?" type thing. He said, "Hey, they're out there. They're doing their job out there. They're digging trenches," or whatever the hell else it was.

So, I got out of the 78th and I went to the 50th Armored Division. It was a good unit. At the time, we had a bunch of Vietnam guys there, too, plus National Guard guys who'd been around, World War II and Korea.

Again, there were a bunch of guys that were beating the draft, if you want to call it "beating the draft." The guys were serving is the way I looked at it. Okay, you're serving, you served. Whether you do it in the National Guard, the Reserves or active duty, at least you're doing something.

So, I was in there for about four-and-a-half years, until '76, '72 to '76. I was a tank company commander there. That was a lot of fun. I was also the battalion maintenance officer and headquarters company commander.

I was up for promotion to major, but they didn't have any slots available for me. One of the reasons was that guys who were in the Guard were getting preference simply because they'd been in the Guard all the way through their careers. There was only one slot available and I think there were three of us were eligible for it, two Guard guys and me.

So, they grabbed the Guard guy, and that wasn't a problem with me. Because the battalion commander I first served under in the Guard had switched over to the Reserves, down in Fort Dix, back to the 78th Division, I went down there. I talked to him and he brought me into the 78th Division. Then, the rest is history.

I had a great career with the 78th. I had a great career. I had great officers and NCOs. That was a time when we were back again to group therapy sessions, because we didn't do one weekend a month. The unit I was in was conducting exercises. We were checking out the combat readiness of units in the Northeast, Guard and Reserve units two and sometimes three weekends a month.

SI: Yes.

MR: So, we'd go out all over the northeast--Fort Drum, Fort Indiantown Gap, Fort Devens. As a matter of fact, we even went up to Canada one time, running exercises up there, checking out the combat readiness of units. The guys that I had working with me, that I worked with, and then, that I had as part of my unit, were all combat vets.

We'd stay overnight at Ft Dix, go to the club, have a couple of beers, have dinner, sit down, just talk. Literally, it was almost like group therapy. Like I said, when I retired in '93, all of a sudden, I missed that. That whole thing, all the camaraderie, therapy sessions, and everything else, is gone. All of sudden, things started popping up again.

SI: When you say you retired in 1993, that was the Guard or the Reserves.

MR: Reserves, that was the end of my thirty years of military service.

SI: Okay.

MR: As a colonel, you can't do more than thirty years' time as an officer.

SI: Were there any other times that you were called up or deployed?

MR: No. We thought so when we were up in Canada, running an exercise up there, in '91 when DESERT STORM started to break out, when the invasion of Kuwait happened. The Army was sending over the 82nd Airborne Division. We were up there and we were alerted. Some guys were called up, but we weren't among them.

[Editor's Note: On August 7, 1990, President George H.W. Bush ordered a buildup of American and coalition forces in the Persian Gulf region after Iraq invaded its southern neighbor, Kuwait, on August 2nd. This was known as Operation DESERT SHIELD. After Iraq refused to withdraw from Kuwait, American and coalition forces bombarded Iraqi forces for several weeks, and then, invaded Kuwait on February 24, 1991, to remove them. Coalition forces then pushed into southern Iraq, which resulted in a ceasefire on February 28, 1991. This action was called Operation DESERT STORM.]

SI: Okay.

MR: The Army was calling up primarily mid-level NCOs and specialized MOS-es [military occupation specialty]. In the 78th, in our unit, it was called the Maneuver Training Command, our surgeon was called up and a couple of our engineer officers were called up. As a matter of fact, one of our engineer officers was the guy that built the POW pens that they had the Iraqis in.

The other guy, the guy's name was Strong, he was one of the chief "chest-cutters" down at Deborah [Heart and Lung Center]. He was a lieutenant colonel with us. He ended up running the medical service and the hospitals over there. Yes, individual soldiers were called up, but the senior officers and senior NCOs weren't.

SI: You also spent twenty-five years at Fort Monmouth as a civilian worker.

MR: Yes.

SI: What were the major challenges you saw in that part of your career? It was HR, you said.

MR: Well, I did HR for four or five years. Then, I got into operations. I was in HR, employee relations, labor relations. I loved it. Then, I had an opportunity to become the Director of Plans, Training and Mobilization over at the Army garrison. It was a promotion.

I went there and was there for four or five years. It was almost like I had five-year groups. So, it was five years with employee relations, labor relations, five years with the garrison, with Director of Planning, Training and Mobilization, and then, five years with Plans Analysis Operations, which is like one step higher.

I ended up being the Deputy to the Chief of Staff at Ft Monmouth. My job at that time was not only to support the Chief of Staff, but was also to close down down Camp Evans, which was an Army sub-post in Wall Township. This was part of the '93 Base Realignment and Closure Act.

SI: Yes.

MR: So, I was involved in that, closing that down, from '95 up until about 2000, 2001.

SI: Yes.

MR: When I was in operations, a lot of my stuff had to do with force protection and counterterrorism. That's how I ended up going into those fields.

When I retired out of Fort Monmouth in 2000, I was too young to fully retire. My wife and I started up a company, the James Thomas Group. We became emergency management, force protection, counterterrorism consultants.

We did a lot of work for the Army; actually, did work for the Army for ten years. We also wrote up plans and exercises for Monmouth County and Ocean County. We worked with the Port Authority, some small businesses, a Jewish temple down in Ocean Township. We did a lot of stuff like that.

I guess the Fort Monmouth closure in 2011 finished that part of my life. We still did the James Thomas Group but we weren't doing that much with it at that time. We kept it for another three years, but, right after Fort Monmouth closed, that was in 2011, 2012, I got a job with Monmouth County, at the Office on Aging, Disabilities and Veteran Services. I qualified for all three: I was an old, disabled vet--so, I mean, I'm right there. So, I stayed there until 2015.

Then, I said, "Hey, time to pull the plug." So, I used to do a lot of work with Camp Evans. When it closed down, one of the reuses was a science and history learning center. So, I got involved in that, first as a volunteer and then I was the chairman from 2006 up to about 2017.

Then, in 2017, we made a couple of changes and I ended up being the CEO. The guy who was the COO at the time had some problems. So, I got a friend of mine who became the Chairman and I became the CEO. They started paying me on a part-time basis, so, I'm doing what I love and getting paid for it and enjoying it!!

SI: Good. You obviously got into the counterterrorism end of things at a key moment. Tell me a little bit about that.

MR: I'll tell you how key that was. So, I retired in 2000. I had about six months' sick leave and annual leave that I could use before the government was finished paying me. So, I'm sitting home in, I guess it was February-March, and I retired in December 2000. So, February-March of 2001, I'm sitting home and the Garrison Commander called me up. He said, "Mike, we're trying to conduct..."

Also, one of my jobs when I was doing the counterterrorism and the operations, I was also doing the special events at Fort Monmouth. By that, I'm talking about the Armed Forces celebrations, conferences like the Secretary of the Army coming in, and special events.

So, he said, "We're running an Armed Forces celebration. I'd like you to do it." I said, "Sure George, no problem at all." The guy's name was George Mudd. So, we set it up. It was a four-day event over Armed Forces Weekend. It was huge and we had a great time doing it. Then, I did the after-action report on it.

About a week later, George comes to me again. He says, "Hey, Mike, you want to do some more stuff?" I said, "What do you have, George?" He said, "Well, one of the guys was supposed to be setting up a counterterrorism exercise for us, but it's a little bit over his head. Do you think you could go in and do it?" I said, "Sure, no problem at all."

By this time, I already had the contract with the Fort Monmouth garrison. So, I said, "Yes." So, they put it on the contract. It was a multi-level, multi-phase counterterrorism exercise. Like I said, we had law enforcement agencies, State Police, FBI, the military, and the New York Port Authority Police.

Starting in the July timeframe, suddenly a little bit of intelligence would come in from someplace out in the Midwest, "Three Arabs were seen coming through here with..." just a little bit of intel. "They were talking about visiting New Jersey." "Anything else?" "No, it was just that, but they looked wrong. It was just a gut instinct." So, you had this coming in, "A conductor on a train reported this." They were all exercise messages over a period of a few months.

So, we set up the exercise. It was going to be conducted at the Fort Monmouth post theater. The scenario was going to be a chemical attack by a disciple of Osama Bin Laden and it was going to take place at eight-thirty in the morning on the morning of 9/11.

[Editor's Note: Osama bin Laden was the leader of the terrorist organization Al-Qaeda, which orchestrated the September 11, 2001 attacks.]

At eight o'clock on 9/11, we're starting to video the exercise because we want to use it for training. Eight-thirty comes and we finished the first video and we're getting ready for the second video. All of a sudden, the Fire Chief comes in, "Hey, Mike, a plane just went into the World Trade Center."

I said, "What? Are you kidding? Are you kidding me, Eric?" "No, some plane just went in." Harry Conover was the Monmouth County Emergency Management Coordinator. He says, "Mike, did you hear that?" I said, "Yes." I said, "We know anything more?" "No." We're thinking maybe it's a small plane.

All of a sudden, about fifteen minutes later, a second plane went in. All of a sudden, we realized this is not an accident. I called off the exercise and told everybody to report back to their supervisors for further instructions. Harry went out to the county to get squared away with his

people in the county Operations Center. The State Police and everyone else went to their respective areas.

I went back to the garrison. The Garrison Commander said, "Hey, Mike, we don't have an operations center here. Can you set one up for us?" So, we set up an operations center. Within a couple, two weeks, I think, I also set up the Force Development Council, which was the police from the four surrounding communities--that's what it started off as: Oceanport, Eatontown, Little Silver and Tinton Falls.

As time went on, the Council kept growing and growing as I'm bringing in more people. I brought in the FBI, the State Police, CSX (the rail guys), New Jersey Transit, and more police. It ended up being close to fifty various organizations involved, but there was one problem with it.

I was not a Regular Army officer. I was not on active duty. I was not a Department of the Army civilian anymore. I was not a contractor; I was a subcontractor. So, I was four levels down from the top.

So, I'm running this operation. I have Regular Army officers and enlisted men reporting to me, I've got contractors reporting to me, I've got Department of the Army civilians reporting to me--until, all of a sudden, someone apparently figured out, "He's not supposed to be doing that." So, they called the legal office. The legal office says, "Whoops, time out. We've got to move Ruane out of there." No one had a problem about it up until that time.

SI: Yes.

MR: Because everyone knew we had to get it done and we all worked together to get it done. Anyway, they got one of the guys from the garrison to head it up. I was basically his deputy, but I was running the thing for him. So we had everybody covered and the legal office was very happy. We kept that Force Protection Council all the way up until the Fort closed. So, it went from 2001 all the way up to 2011.

We did have bad guys, bad actors, coming in and trying to get into the Fort occasionally. We found them filming and taking pictures of various changes of the guard at the gates and various other things like that. So, I mean, they were looking at us, but nothing ever happened with Ft Monmouth like it did down in Fort Dix, because down in Fort Dix was where they actually had some guys get on to the post.

[Editor's Note: On May 8, 2007, six individuals who were conspiring to attack and kill military personnel at Fort Dix, New Jersey, were arrested by the FBI.]

SI: Yes.

MR: That was my cool contractor career with counterterrorism. After 9/11 the county started hiring us to do exercises and write plans. We did a whole bunch of exercises for Long Branch, for Tinton Falls, for various schools including Hazlet, Delbarton, and Long Branch. It was a lot

of fun. My wife got trained by DHS [Department of Homeland Security] down at Fort McClellan, Alabama as a weapons of mass destruction instructor.

She was already a teacher at the time, a special ed teacher at Long Branch. She said, "This fits in perfectly with special ed teaching," working with weapons of mass destruction. One of the things I used to tell people, "If you hear that I committed suicide by ricin," I said, "you'd better check my wife, because she knows how to use ricin to kill people."

We, myself, Barbara and one of my sons, were training the trainers for a lot of the stuff that the TSA [Transportation Security Administration] was doing. Like I said, it was a good time, we met a lot of people and got a lot of stuff done.

Then, the grant money started fading. The towns and the municipalities and county government were using grant money in order to hire us, but, then, the grant money started going down. So, when the grant money went down, we said, "Hey, that's it, we had a good run. We had a good run with the company."

SI: Your sons worked with the company.

MR: Yes, they were part-time.

SI: Okay.

MR: Myself and Barabra were full time. We had part-timers, per diem guys if you want to call them that.

SI: Okay.

MR: When we had an exercise coming up, I reached out to people I knew who had the skills I needed depending on the focus of the exercise. I'm not talking about Charlie Oatmeal that lives down the block who's a volunteer fireman. I'm talking about guys that had credentials behind them, so when they talked to someone about emergency management, the guys we are evaluating are going to listen, "Yes, okay, fine."

Jimmy and Tommy also worked for us. Actually, Tommy, my youngest son, ended up being a logistician. He supplied all the radios, computers, check-sheets, etc. making certain all the stuff was ready and operational. Jimmy was operations. He was pretty good with that. Then, the other guys, they all had their specialties, for example, one of my guys was an Army Ranger, another an ex-fire chief of a large city, another a former police chief. Another a SWAT team chief.

Here is an example of what we did. My ex-brother-in-law worked for a very expensive high school up in North Jersey, where it's pretty big with the upper class.

SI: Okay.

MR: So, he said, "Mike, I'm concerned about up here, because there's no security, nothing. They think that they're fine, but..." He said, "Can you do an assessment for us?" We went up there for the assessment. I'll tell you, my guys were walking through classrooms, walking into a classroom, "Excuse me, Miss Illingworth, is James Such-and-Such here?" "Oh, no, we don't have him in this class." "Oh, I'm sorry." "Okay," and he walked out, but he could walk into any classroom like this and no one questioned him.

SI: Yes.

MR: He could walk into the school, into the classroom, no problem at all--and they said, "Oh."

SI: Yes.

MR: They had their heads buried, literally buried, in the sand. We wrote up our assessment, wrote up the after-action, and sent it out to them. Like I said, my ex-brother-in-law said, "Mike, they didn't do anything. They made no changes whatsoever."

SI: Wow.

MR: It was just satisfying new requirements. Someone said, "Hey, you should do something like this." "Okay, we'll do it," and now stick it in the drawer, forget about it.

SI: Is there any other aspect that you want to talk about? It is interesting to me that your sons both became infantry officers.

MR: Wasn't my idea.

SI: Yes.

MR: I tried to keep them away from that as much as possible.

SI: Okay.

MR: Well, I've got six sons and just the two youngest are the ones that wanted to go in the service. I told them, "That was my career. That's not yours." I said, "You do what you want to do."

My son, Tommy, the youngest, he got a scholarship to St. Peter's, met a girl from Penn State and started going out with her. She was a year ahead of him. He went out to Penn State and came back from a weekend there and told me, "Dad, when I'm a junior, I'm going to switch out to Penn State." "Okay, go." So, he went out to Penn State.

So, from having a scholarship, he now had no scholarship. I was able to get him some money, but he went to ROTC. He said, "I can get a scholarship with ROTC." So, he went into the Air Force ROTC program, but he got out of the Air Force ROTC after six months because he was too big.

Tommy's six-foot-four, 260 pounds. I mean, he's a big man. They wanted him to lose thirty pounds over the winter break. He couldn't do it and he got out of the Air Force ROTC but then was accepted into Army ROTC.

He also joined the Army Guard at the time, because he figured out, "Okay, if I join the Army Guard, I can make some money at the same time." So, he went to basic training because he wanted to be in aviation. His plan was to go to basic training, come out of basic training, get his ROTC commission, then, go into Army Aviation. Tommy, at the time, and Jimmy were volunteer firemen. Tommy was involved in three companies, Long Branch, West Long Branch and Monmouth Beach. He loved it. He felt that going into aviation, he could get into search-and-rescue because he was also taking search-and-rescue courses. But, when he went to basic training, he decided he wanted to go to infantry. It changed his mind to infantry. I was also surprised that he went into the Guard on his own. He went into the Guard, he said, "Dad, this is something I'm going to do." "Tommy, what you got to do is what you got to do, not what I did." So Tommy got commissioned.

When we were out at Penn State, at Tommy's commissioning, Jimmy thinks that's pretty cool, because Jimmy had gone to Seton Hall and was in ROTC for two years. He didn't like it and got out. So, now it's five years later. All of a sudden, he says, "Wait a second, look, Tommy's getting commissioned. I want to get back into the military." So, Jimmy joins the Jersey Guard.

SI: Wow.

MR: He joins the Jersey Guard, goes to basic training, and then goes to OCS. Then, he becomes an infantry officer. So, that's how they ended up in the Infantry. I had one other son, my son Brian, my next youngest, who wanted to get in the Army, but he couldn't because of his feet. So, that's it. None of the rest of the kids did.

SI: Again, is there anything else you would like to discuss, about any part of your life?

MR: It's been good.

SI: All right.

MR: I mean, I'll tell you, you have regrets for the things you never did, but I don't have regrets for the things I did. I thought I was a pretty good officer, and the reason I say that is because we go to reunions, the guys still buy me drinks.

SI: Yes, that is a good sign. [laughter]

MR: If they didn't like me, they'd be throwing them at me when we get together. Again, I was mentioning earlier about the camaraderie. I mean, we have, I guess maybe every year, a bunch of us try and get together. It depends upon who's sick, who's not sick, who's away, who's around. I guess it was this past July when five of us got together up in Connecticut at Greg Kitchen's place.

Two of them, three of them, were my infantrymen, one was a guy that was not in my company, and it was myself, five of us. It's funny how important times are that we got together, because within three weeks after that, one of the guys was just driving home and was killed, was killed in a car accident.

SI: Wow.

MR: And just the camaraderie, the closeness that we had when we're talking up there. We're talking old times. Once upon a time at the reunions, it used to be telling war stories. Then, as time went on, as the guys are getting older, they're getting married. Now, we've got grandchildren. Now, we're talking about our grandchildren. Now, we're talking about, "How many medications are you taking?"

SI: Yes. [laughter]

MR: "What was your last operation? Can you do that?" So, I mean, it's funny the way things change and the way the circle of life goes around.

SI: It sounds like you had reunions pretty soon after the war.

MR: Actually, the first one we had was '85.

SI: Okay, yes.

MR: So, it was twelve, fifteen years after the war. The biggest one we had was probably up in Buffalo, going back about ten years ago. We had close to a thousand guys from the unit.

SI: Wow.

MR: We figured out eleven thousand guys went through the 196th, at one time or another. We got a thousand at a reunion. One of my riflemen, Kenny McKenzie, is the guy that does the 196th newsletter. He has the roster of the guys and, at the time, I think we had a roster of close to three thousand guys. We could identify three thousand of the guys.

SI: Wow.

MR: But, a lot of guys don't want to be found. You have those that don't want to be found, you have those that didn't even know there was an organization, the 196th Association. When they find out, they say, "Wow, where you guys been?" All of a sudden, we find them again.

There are great parts about the reunions. This happened out in Cincinnati--a bunch of us are sitting around, had to be around three o'clock in the morning. At that time, we'd be up three, four, five o'clock in the morning. So we're sitting there, just drinking beers, talking. No one's drunk; we're just sitting there.

All of a sudden, one of the guys breaks down, because he was a mortarman and he fired a short round that killed someone, killed one of our guys. He'd been carrying that in his mind for years. This was the first time he ever told anybody about it. I'll tell you, the guys just grouped right in on him and were working with him and trying to bring him down, helping him cope.

SI: Yes.

MR: So, you still see it happening. Guys come in who have never been at a reunion before, "Were you there? When?"

SI: Wow.

MR: So, I guess you asked if I had anything else to add. The main thing is, I'm glad I've done what I've done.

SI: Yes.

MR: I've got a great family. Now, I'm up to eleven grandkids, one of whom is eight months old, and so, I mean, life is good. I'm just watching the circle of life with my family and I'm watching the circle of life with my buddies. I think it's pretty cool.

SI: That is a good sentiment to end on.

MR: Yes.

SI: Like I said, we can always add things later, but thank you so much.

MR: No problem at all, Shaun, no problem at all.

SI: I really appreciate it. It was really fascinating.

-----END OF TRANSCRIPT-----

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