

Why Not Do It?
Elliott Fishburne

I'm Lieutenant Colonel Elliott G. Fishburne III. I am currently 71 years old. I had two tours in Vietnam, 1967-68, the first tour, as a captain; second tour in Vietnam, 1970-71, I was a major. I was with the 3rd of the 22nd Infantry, 25th Infantry Division, my first tour. I was in II Field Force Headquarters, which then became Track III Headquarters for my second tour. I spent the entire those"each of those two years in Vietnam. Today's date is 13 April, 2011.

Interviewer

Could you spell your name?

Elliott Fishburne

My name is spelled F-I-S-H-B-U-R-N-E, first name, Elliott, two Ls, two Ts.

Elliott Fishburne

Gotcha. Do you remember where you were when you first got orders for Vietnam?

Elliott Fishburne

Everyone remembers that day. I was in the Armor officer advanced course, Fort Knox, Kentucky. I was in a course that probably half of the people in the course had been to Vietnam; the other half were very similar to me, were coming in from all over the world. But everyone that hadn't been to Vietnam knew that they were going to go to Vietnam. So when the orders came in, it was absolutely no surprise. The only thing that you were looking at at that time was, you know, where you were going to go and what kind of assignment [you would get].

Elliott Fishburne

I had a rather strange assignment, because in about February, January-February 1967, 12 of us, all in the same class, got a letter from Armor branch, and we were all Armor, stating that there was a new program ongoing for Vietnam called the Armor Infantry Infusion Program. And what they wanted to do was provide Infantry officers, Armor assigned Armor officers to Infantry, because Infantry was being taxed too heavily, providing both the advisors and the TO&E [Table of Organization and Equipment] unit officers. Armor branch went into negotiations with Infantry branch on this particular subject, and Infantry branch wanted to send all 12 of us over as advisors. Armor branch held fast, and said, "If we give you 12 armor officers, they all have to go to TO&E units." Table regular, American units, and not going into advisory slots.

Interviewer

What are they "sorry"?

Elliott Fishburne

TO&E, table of organization and equipment"their"that applies to all of the units in the Army come under a"some type of TO&E. So we were all"Armor branch worked out the deal whereby we would all go to American Infantry units.

Interviewer

What date—when did you receive your orders? What was the date?

Elliott Fishburne

Probably about February, and we graduated like the first of June.

Interviewer

February of?

Elliott Fishburne

Of 1967, so we had about four months—advance. But one of the odd things about this, which usually doesn't happen in the Army, is we were told by Armor branch that accepted one of these slots was strictly voluntary; that we didn't have to do it. So the 12 of us—and we all knew each other—some were West Point graduates, some were not. We got together and said, "Okay, how did the 12 of us ever get selected?" And the only thing that we all 12 had in common that we'd commanded Armor units—either Armor Cav or straight Armor units—in our previous assignments. And

Elliott Fishburne

And we all decided—and all 12 of us decided, "Okay, why not do it?" If we're going to Vietnam, we'd just as soon go over there [as] Infantry as Armor; maybe it was even better. So we all elected to go, and we all then graduated end of May. But then we all, all 12 of us, had to go to an Infantry refresher course at Fort Benning, Georgia, for two weeks; and, you would've thought that we were all captains now commanding companies—and this was absolutely the lowest level training that you could possibly get. They taught us how to dig a foxhole. And then we had the commandant of the Infantry school a brigadier general would come out and measure our foxhole to make sure that it was exactly the right dimensions of two by two by four deep. And if it wasn't, we had to continue digging. Well, it's kinda curious that that foxhole was the last foxhole I ever dug. And

Elliott Fishburne

But anyway, we passed that course, and then about a week or two—I can't remember exact time frame—after that, we all went to jungle warfare school in Panama. I think that was—I can't remember—it was either a two or three-week course. Very hard course; a lot of escape and evasion training, a lot of patrolling, but probably—and most of us felt, when we finished that course, we couldn't wait to get to Vietnam, because it was a pretty tough course. And

Elliott Fishburne

And then along I think it was about the first week in August, 1967—we went back to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, and shipped out to Vietnam. And I had orders—this doesn't always happen, but I had orders as the headquarters company commander for the 3rd Battalion, 22nd Infantry. And I—when I got to Vietnam, I went completely through the reassignment process there, the replacement depot, if you will, and somehow I went to exactly that same slot as headquarters company commander. And

Elliott Fishburne

And I was in that slot for about three weeks, in Dao Chiang, which is in northwest of Saigon in what they called War Zone C, also known as the Fishhook. The 3rd Brigade, which I was my battalion was a part of, is located in Dao Chiang, and there were two other brigades in that general area one in Cu Chi, where the division headquarters was, and one brigade in Tay Ninh.

Hit the Ground Running
Interviewer

What was your first impression of the country?

Elliott Fishburne

I thought it was a very pretty, pretty country; the problem is the base camp we were in in Dao Chiang was right adjacent to the Michelin rubber plantation. And our headquarters actually occupied many of the stucco French-style buildings that the French that used to run the Michelin rubber plantation built back in the 50s. It was a beautiful area. However, the Michelin rubber plantation itself was a snake pit for the Vietcong. They were all over it, and they occupied the villages at night, and no one could fire into any of these villages. They were all no-fire zones. They had almost free license to fire at us, and mortar rounds would come in, and we could hear them go down the tube, but couldn't even return fire into the villages.

Interviewer

Who designated the villages no-fire zones?

Elliott Fishburne

That was all that was designated by MACV headquarters and passed down to the division.

Interviewer

So supreme Vietnam headquarters?

Elliott Fishburne

Yes. Yep. Michelin rubber we could we got engaged in conflicts there, but we could not fire artillery into any of the villages, even when they fired out at us. But, anyway, I was in that role for three weeks as a headquarters company commander, and never left the base camp during those three weeks.

Elliott Fishburne

And I was in believe it or not, I was watching a television show in my little room in one of these villas at about 8:00 at night, and the battalion XO comes walking in, said, "Fishburne, you're taking over Charlie Company tomorrow morning. Charlie Company commander got hit today, and there'll be a helicopter to take you out to the company, which was out in the field, tomorrow morning." So that's when my real journey began, and I started packing my stuff and heading out.

Interviewer

And that would've been when?

Elliott Fishburne

That was in the end of August, around the first of September, 1967.Â

Interviewer

What was sort of the status of the war at that point?Â

Elliott Fishburne

Well, obviously, it was before the Tet Offensive. Our unitsâ€”and I can only talk to our units around usâ€”wasâ€”were all involved in search and destroy type of operations. We would go out, try to find the enemy, do away with him if we could, but we were never really attacked by the enemyâ€”until we found them. But that was the wholeâ€”whole thing, search and destroy, and it was kinda, kind of odd that the morning that I went out and joined Charlie Company, they had been out for probably a week or so; and I flew in not knowing a single person in the companyâ€”not knowing any NCOs, not knowing any of the officers; and I flew in at six oâ€™clock in the morning, and at eight oâ€™clock that morning, we moved out on a mission. And so I had to hit the ground running, so to speak.Â

Interviewer

How largeâ€”how full-strength was the company?

Elliott Fishburne

It was pretty muchâ€”I had my full allotment of officers. I had my three platoon leaders, I had an XO. And at that particular time, I had my first sergeant, who was an E8. The platoon sergeants at that particular phase were E7s, as they shouldâ€™ve been, and I had fairly good rank structure. The company was probably at 95-96 percent strength.Â

Interviewer

How long would these missions last when youâ€™d go out on sweeps?Â

Elliott Fishburne

They can vary. They could be anywhere from out and back the same day to several days to a week to two weeks. Normally, not more than two weeks, if youâ€™â€™cause you walk outside your base campâ€”your normâ€”our normal mode of operation was not to fly places, but to go on patrols outside the base camp, and however far we could go in a week or two weeks, and then back into the base camp where weâ€™and have a few days off. Occasionally, we would helicopter into an area. We would load up right in our base camp and take off in helicopters, go into an LZ [landing zone]â€”hoping it wasnâ€™t a hot LZ, i.e., a hostileâ€”and I only hit one hostile LZ during the time, and that was only from sniper fire and not any real organized enemy activity when we went into the LZ.

Interviewer

And how was it determined which areas you would patrol?

Elliott Fishburne

Brigade would come down with orders to battalion. Â Battalion would then assign the companies to do it. Â And normally, the operations were noâ€”at that particular time were no more than company-size. Â Companies would go out individually, always staying within

range of artillery support. A Occasionally, we would be attachedâ€”often, one of the battalions in our brigade was a mechanized battalion, the 2ndâ€”the 22nd Infantry. A Occasionally, they would attach when they would go out, they would need infantry on the ground, in many cases, and sometimes our companies were attached to them as they would go out on operations.

Interviewer

Youâ€™re saying, basically, it was a game of cat and mouse.

Elliott Fishburne

Yeah, cat and mouse. A To me, the strangest thing about the Vietnam War was we never held any ground. A Weâ€”we owned our base camps, and we went out from our base camps, and weâ€™d have an operation, and weâ€™d come back in, and weâ€™d leave the placeâ€”unless we made contact and found a base camp and destroyed it, which didnâ€™t really mean that much. A But we would neverâ€”never really own any territory. A

Elliott Fishburne

The land was so flat, there were absolutely no markings. A The maps were not real good. A What looked like, youâ€™d see aâ€”what looked like a road on a map, and it was nothing more than a cart path; I mean almost nothingâ€”with overgrownâ€”so youâ€™it was hard to tell where we are; and this was, obviously, before our GPS systems, global positioning systems; and youâ€™d be out there with a compass and this map, which was inaccurate. A And that was another problem, when kind of our tactic at that time where we would go, and there was an awful lot of thick jungle in which we would have to cut our way through. A And when weâ€™d make contact with the enemy, if it wasnâ€™t anything more than sniper fire and harassing sniper fire, we would attempt to find the location and do away with thatâ€”the elements of one or two or three guys. A

Elliott Fishburne

If we came across something larger than that, our instructions were to back off and bring in artillery on it. A Well, the problem was when youâ€™re in the jungle and you can hardly see the sky, and youâ€™re not exactly sure within 500 meters, even 1,000 meters, exactly where you are, youâ€™re very careful with the artillery. A You call it in as far out as you know itâ€™s safe, and then work it back in, because it was just too hard to bring it in close right away. A So that was always a problem.

Interviewer

How was morale at that point?

Elliott Fishburne

I thought morale was excellent. A In my companyâ€”of course, it was a volunteer Army back then. A There were a lot of people who didnâ€™t want to be there, that were complaining about being there.

Interviewer

It was a draftee Army, right?

Elliott Fishburne

A drafteeâ€”Iâ€™m sorryâ€”a draftee Army, obviously. Â And everyone was so committed to the operation, and it wasâ€”it was, you were always in such danger that I donâ€™t think anyone had a chance to really go off into the drug scene. Â They were worried about, you know, if they got high or this or that, they wouldnâ€™t be able to fight and do this stuff. Â I neverâ€”during the six months that I had the company, I never had one drug-related incident. Â Now, Iâ€™m not saying there werenâ€™t any, but I never saw one, and I never had one reported to me, so morale was pretty high. Â

Elliott Fishburne

We never hadâ€”even though it was a draft Army, we never had anyone that refused to go out on an operation. Â We had very low sick call rate unless someone was actually wounded. Â Â

Elliott Fishburne

There was one incident, and Iâ€™ll never forget, this young, youngâ€” young soldier came up to me. Â We had been out for a couple days, and he said, â€œIâ€™ve decided Iâ€™m a conscientious objector, and I am not going to carry a rifle any longer.â€ Â And I said, â€œOkay. Â You can walk right behind me, and you can be the shovel-bearer. Â When we stop at night, you can dig a hole and whatever.â€ Â We got into an operation in which I had a lieutenant that was hit out by a sniper out in this field area; and there was fire coming in, and this young man, even though he said he was a conscientious objector, he grabbed the gurney, if you will, and he ran a zig-zag trail out to this lieutenant, and he and another one brought him back, even though they were under fire the entire time. Â Well, that convinced me he was maybe a conscientious objector, but Iâ€™d never run across that before, and I thought that was very interesting that he was that brave that he would do that, but he didnâ€™t wanna carry a rifle. Â That was an unusual event.

Interviewer

Did you believe in the mission at that point?

Elliott Fishburne

Yes, absolutely. Â I thoughtâ€”you know, as an idealistic young captain, I was there, and I said, â€œThis is my war; letâ€™s go get it done.â€ Â And, even though I didnâ€™tâ€”I thought some of the things that we did werenâ€™t very smart, you know; I never got an order that we didnâ€™t carry out, and I thought we were doing a good job when we did go out and carry the mission. Â But I donâ€™t think there were anyâ€”I had no feelings at that time that we had lost the war, that we were in the wrong place at the wrong timeâ€”not at all.

Interviewer

What were the orders that you thought werenâ€™t very smart?

Elliott Fishburne

Well, I thought just going out and clearing an area and then going back into base camp, and you know, you get a couple people wounded, and you might kill one or two of them that, you know; and you knew, you know, that four weeks from now, youâ€™ll probably go back in the same area and do the same thing, so, you know, what were you really accomplishing there? Â That was my big thing. Â Â

Elliott Fishburne

There was one—there was one terrain feature in our entire area. Near Tay Ninh there was a very tall mountain, kind of a conical mountain, called Nui Ba Den. I think the translation is something like the black virgin mountain. And the Vietcong owned that mountain, and they had caves in it, they had it loaded. And on the very top of that mountain, we had a signal outpost that we owned; it was all a compound; and they were heavily fortified, but it was the highest thing in all of the south part of Vietnam, so it was a great place for a signal unit.

Elliott Fishburne

And so we had a signal unit up there, but between that unit and the ground, the Vietcong owned it, and owned it for the entire time I was there, because the price for trying to attack that mountain would've just been too great, and so we just left it completely alone. Everything that went into the top of that mountain went in by helicopter—in or out by helicopter. That was a kind of a strange situation, but we couldn't—evidently, the higher-ups decided we couldn't take it.

All Hell Broke Loose

Interviewer

Were most of the enemy contacts you had against Vietcong elements? Did you ever come up against the North Vietnamese Army regular elements?

Elliott Fishburne

All during the first part of my tour—most of the time that I was a company commander, it was all against the Vietcong, and small operations, small units, you know; we never ran across anything, I don't think, more than a platoon-size unit. That all kind of came to an end in December, 1967—last day, New Year's Eve. There was supposedly a Christmas truce for both sides, and we hadn't had any contact in a couple days. I had been out—I had attached to the 2nd of the 27th Infantry, which was a mech[anized] unit, and I had been out with them on operation for about a week. And on New Year's Eve, I was airlifted into what was known as Fire Support Base Burt, B-U-R-T.

Interviewer

Where was this?

Elliott Fishburne

This was in the northwest part of War Zone C, probably in an area called the Fishhook, and probably not more than about ten miles from the Cambodian border. And our brigade had set up a brigade fire support base there; and it was a big fire support base. We had a 155 Battalion, a 105 Battalion, the 2nd of the 22nd, the mechanized battalion, was there, and my battalion was there, the 3rd of the 22nd, so it was an extremely large fire base not to be a permanent fire base.

Interviewer

And these mechanized battalions were what, APCs [armored personnel carriers] or?

Elliott Fishburne

All APCs. And they were basically, you know, like an Infantry company. I had three

platoons; the mechanized battalion had three APC platoons. And, so I wasâ€”I was detached from thisâ€”the 2nd of the 27th Infantry and flown into fire support base on the afternoon on New Yearâ€™s Eve. And I relieved another company that had been in our battalion that went back to base camp. So at that particular time, we had two full battalions, andâ€”

Elliott Fishburne

Well, a battalionâ€”with the artillery, we had well over a thousand people in there. You know, each battalion had, you know, 500-plus, and then you had your artillery, and then you had your brigade headquarters, so it was a large base. And so that afternoon after I got there, we took over these positions that had already been done by the other, but they were, in my opinion, totally inadequate. So we were digging all afternoon, and dug in; and just about nightfall, I had a good friend that had one of the mech[anized] companies, and I was over sitting on the back of his trackâ€”you know, probably 100 yards from where my unit was. That wasâ€”we were all dug in for the night, really; it wasnâ€™t quite dark. And all of a sudden, mortar rounds started coming in. So I headed back over to my company.

Interviewer

Approximately how many men?â€”

Elliott Fishburne

And the way they organized this fire support base, it wasnâ€™t really very smart, because there was kind of a road that went down the middle of it. One half of the road, on one side of the road, in a semicircle, they had the mech battalion. On the other side, they had a straight Infantry battalion. Well, all the heavy guns, the 50 calibers and everything, were on one side, and all we had were rifles and a few machine guns on the other side.â€”

Interviewer

And how large a space was this?â€”

Elliott Fishburne

Oh, quarter of a mile.

Interviewer

Okay.â€”

Elliott Fishburne

So it was, you know, a pretty good area when you got two battalions, plus two battalions of artilleryâ€”at least a quarter of a mile. But so we tied inâ€”my company tied in with the mech. I was on the right flank of my battalion, and I tied in with the mech company, and we tied in at where the road met. And first, when the mortar rounds started coming in, then all of a sudden everything started to come in. I mean we wereâ€”and now it was dark. So all of a suddenâ€”I had also had an ambush patrol out, 14 men out, probably about a half-mile out in front, and I got a call from them, talking with them, and they said, â€œWe got people all around us. Weâ€™re lying low. We canâ€™t even take them on; there are just too many of them.â€” And then I started getting calls from my LPs, my listening points that were out about 100 yards, and theyâ€™re saying, â€œWeâ€™ve got them all around us.â€”

Elliott Fishburne

And then all hell broke loose. I mean we started getting a frontal assault fromâ€”and I think the main part of the attack came at my company and the mech company that was on my right. And within 15 minutes after the attack began, all fiveâ€”the platoon that I was tied in with on the right-hand side, the mech platoon, all five of their tracks were burning. And within 30 minutes, I wasâ€”I was just about overrun. I lost contact with the ambush patrol. I lost contact with my listening post. And still had contact, obviously, with my platoonsâ€”I was right in back of them, in a bunker. And the platoon leader said, â€œWell, youâ€™d better get us some help down here.â€ So I ran back to the brigade TOC [Tactical Operations Center], which was aboutâ€”brigade tactical operations centerâ€”which was about a hundred yards in back of me. Ran into a classmate of mine who was the artillery fire support coordinator, and told him, â€œWe need everything you got right in front of us. You can lower the guns. Â Start loading beehive rounds, because if we canâ€™t stop them with the lowered guns, theyâ€™re coming through us.â€

Interviewer

Whatâ€™s a beehive round?

Elliott Fishburne

A beehive round is an artillery round that has thousands of little steel flechettes in it; so when it goes out, it justâ€”a spray pattern, and it can reallyâ€”and you only fire those type things when itâ€™s a frontal assault type thing, so youâ€™ve got the barrel lowered to the horizontal point. And so I get back in, and fortunately, these guns fired for hoursâ€”literally fired for hours, right direct fire, right over us, rightâ€”and I just told everyone in the line, â€œDo the best you can from where you are. We canâ€™t bring anyone else in. The artilleryâ€™s gonna be firing.â€

Elliott Fishburne

And this was a huge violation of theâ€”as you can tellâ€”the cease fire operation that had been in effect. And it was the onlyâ€”I think the only contact in all of Vietnam that particular night. So we had all the air support that we needed. I mean we wereâ€”we had napalm runs coming in, dropping it right out in front of us. Unfortunately, it happensâ€”you know, my listening post, they never came back. None of them ever came back. The ambush patrols stayed down, but Iâ€™ll get to them a little later.

Elliott Fishburne

But weâ€”and all night long, we had the jolly green giants coming in, the Air Force C-130s that had the Gatlin guns mounted on the sides, and they were spraying all night long. And this lasted till about five in the morning.

Interviewer

And it started at what time?

Elliott Fishburne

Probably about ten oâ€™clock.

Interviewer

In the evening.

Elliott Fishburne

In the evening. So it was a good seven or eight hours of constant fire. Â It broke off probably sometime justâ€”just before daylightâ€”I donâ€™t knowâ€”four thirty, five, maybe six oâ€™clock. And then it was a question of seeing what we had left, and my company and the platoon next to me took heavy casualties. I donâ€™t know what the extent of theirs was, but most of the 50 caliber machine guns in the mech unit, theyâ€™d fired them all night long, and the barrels had absolutely meltedâ€”theyâ€™d justâ€”they just continuous fire.

Elliott Fishburne

But the main thrust of it, unfortunately, was right in my unit, and the unit right to my right, and the next day theyâ€”well, we went out and surveyed what we had, and then went out to try toâ€”we sent out from one of the other companies, â€”cause my company was too badly hit. Went out to the ambush site, and got all 14 of them back. I think four were dead and the other ten were wounded, but they brought all them back in. All of the listening post peopleâ€”I had three listening posts outâ€”all three of them were dead. And I lost 50 percent of my company that night. I started at 116, and I had 58 that werenâ€™t wounded or killed. I think it was eitherâ€”and you never know exactly how many were killed or died, because they get evacuated back to the hospital, thatâ€™s the last you ever hear. But I know I had 16 to 18 dead before any of the evacuations started; so I was, generally speaking, a non-combat-ready [unit], obviously, and was pulled back to the rear later that day.

After the Battle of Fire Support Base Burt
Elliott Fishburne

The next morning, you know, I was sitting there kind of in a daze after weâ€™d kind of made a tally of everything, and all of a sudden we see a MACV headquarters chopper come flying in; and General Westmoreland gets out and comes over and says, â€œCongratulations on holding and doing a good job.â€ I didnâ€™t even want to talk to him; just, you know, whatever. But weâ€”it was determined after a couple days that weâ€™d been hit by two NVA regiments, and didnâ€™t know it at the time, until about a month later, that we were the prelude to the Tet Offensive, and that wasâ€”we were sittingâ€”our fire support base was sitting right in their plans for the main axis of advance into Saigon. And thatâ€™s why they hit us. It was the first time theyâ€™d ever hit in those type numbers.

Elliott Fishburne

And one thing that never came outâ€”and we knew it was true anywayâ€”is there were quite a few Chinese advisors with these NVA units. â€”Cause all of a sudden, you know, we were out, and there were bodies everywhere, but all of a sudden youâ€™d come across this 6â€™2â€”guy, and you knew that wasnâ€™t a Vietnamese. And I donâ€™t know if anyone ever really wanted to say that there were Chinese advisors there, but there sure were.

Elliott Fishburne

And day after I left there, they brought out bulldozers, and they just dug trenches and started pushing the dead into the trenches, â€”cause it was just such a horrible slaughter out there with all the napalm and everything else that had gone.Â

Interviewer

Any idea how many of the enemy died in that engagement?Â

Elliott Fishburne

I think they were saying something like 500 that they knew of, but, you know, there was an awful lot more than that were carted off or dragged off or whatever. Â But thatâ€™s why they brought the couple bulldozers out, just to dig all these mass graves and push them into it. And it was mostly inâ€™letâ€™s say if you have a perimeter of 360 degrees, almost all the fighting was within 90 to 100 degrees around my area and the next unit over and so forth.

Elliott Fishburne

But that was my major contact, and about three weeks after the company was reconstituted back in our base camp, I wasâ€™I then moved on to my next assignment, which was the assistant S3, the tactical operations control officer for the brigade. And I was there in Dao Chiang for aboutâ€™oh, about three weeks, and [the] Tet [Offensive] hit, and then our brigade immediately moved to Saigon, and with our units, and we were then on the western side of Saigon, forming a defensive perimeter around Saigon with the Tet Offensive.

Interviewer

Before we get to the Tet Offensive, I just have a question. How long did it take you to recover from thatâ€™the afterâ€™I mean seeing your unit so badly mauled? How long did it take you to sort of regain your feet after that?Â

Elliott Fishburne

Well, it took a little while. You know, it probably shouldâ€™ve taken longer, maybe. You know, you just get hardened to certain things. But probably after a few days, â€™cause, you know, I was the only officer that wasnâ€™t either killed or woundedâ€™the only oneâ€™and thatâ€™s kind of hard. I hadâ€™I had previously, in other contacts, Iâ€™d had one platoon leader killed and a couple wounded, and my XO was killed, so. Â And somehow, you know, I didnâ€™t have anything with my name on it. But I went through at least in mostâ€™during six months, three rotations of platoon leaders.

Interviewer

They were allâ€™Â

Elliott Fishburne

None of them went out, you know, because theyâ€™d served their time. They were either killed or wounded. Now, you know I think I had two killed that night, and Iâ€™d had one platoon leader and an XO killed previous to that, and several others wounded.

Interviewer

Does that engagement have a name at all?

Elliott Fishburne

Oh, itâ€™s the battle of Fire Support Base Burt. Â Thatâ€™s the only thing I know it by.

Interviewer

As a result of that engagement, did your feelings about the war change? A Did itâ€”

Elliott Fishburne

No. Â

Interviewer

Were youâ€”did you think you could be hit so hard?

Elliott Fishburne

Never thought that we could, but, you know, when you look at what hit us and, if you will, the body count on each side, you know, we won, and maybe we even set back the Tet Offensive for a couple weeks; who knows? Â I just donâ€™t know that.

Interviewer

How effective was the coordination of the air support? Â Is thatâ€”Â

Elliott Fishburne

That was mostly done from the brigade TOC [Tactical Operations Center], â€™cause I had told them, you know, â€œPut it right in front of us. Â You make it as close as you can in front of us.â€” Â And they knew where our front lines were, so they were actually controlling the planes coming in and the jolly green giants [Air Force C-130s] and all that fire. Â I did not control that. Â I had an artillery observer with me, a lieutenant, but after when everything broke loose, he really had nothing to do with adjusting any artillery fire or anything else; he was just there. Â

Elliott Fishburne

So what happened during Tetâ€”skipping back to whereâ€”

Elliott Fishburne

Skipping forward to Tet, you know, when I was the TOC [Tactical Operations Center] operations officer, all of our units were in the defensive position. Â We had other units. Â We had a cav squadron also attached to our brigade. Â And generally speaking, we justâ€”we didnâ€™t have that many battles, â€™cause we arrived in Saigon after they had made their major hit against Tan Sun Nhut airfield and that. Â So we arrived there after that.Â Â

Elliott Fishburne

And ourâ€”we didnâ€™t have any big battles, any of our units have any big battles, â€™cause after the Tan Sun Nhut fiasco when they were caught in the open, they pulled back, and that was really the last of the big threats to Saigon. Â And so we did our constant patrolling, and we had minor skirmishes, but nothing major while I was there, â€™cause I leftâ€”I left the brigade, I think it was in July of 1968.

Interviewer

So the period after Tet was relatively uneventful for you?

Elliott Fishburne

After Tet, yeah. "As far as we were concerned, they were back licking their wounds, and we didn't know what they were doing. " But there were no more major pushes at any of our units after that.

Interviewer

And where were you for that last four or five months?

Elliott Fishburne

I was right on the outskirts of Saigon, and our brigade headquarters was located just on the western side of Saigon, with our units kind of in defensive perimeters around Saigon.

Interviewer

Did you get to know Saigon much in that time?

Elliott Fishburne

No. "I've never been in Saigon. " And I just never had any desire to go there.

Interviewer

So you were pulled out of Vietnam when "when did you come back "when did that tour end?

Elliott Fishburne

I rotated out in July of 1968.

Interviewer

And what was your next assignment?

Elliott Fishburne

My next assignment I went to "I was the regimental S4 for " supply officer, if you will, for the 6th Army Cav at Fort Meade, Maryland. " I was there for about 10 months, and I got orders to go to Army comptrollership school at Syracuse, and I went up there for 13 "for 15 months, and from there, back to Vietnam.

Reflections of the USMA Class of 1962

Interviewer

We "I'll get to your second tour in Vietnam in a moment, but you remember the class of 1962 at West Point. We talked a little bit about this earlier. When you came to the Academy in 1958 "

Elliott Fishburne

1958, the last undefeated football team.

Interviewer

You had no idea that you "d actually end up "

Elliott Fishburne

Right. No one in our class even thought about going to war, in 1958 or even when we graduated in 1962. At that time, I think there were a few—a few—advisors in Vietnam, but it was so small that none of us even thought that it would have any impact on us, or no one. We really weren't sure what they were doing over there.

Interviewer

What was—how did you end up at the Point? How did you end up going to—

Elliott Fishburne

I was I think a third alternate. I applied—I went to school in Middletown, Delaware, St. Andrew's School. A A

Elliott Fishburne

And I applied, kind of as an afterthought, to West Point, and as a third alternate, I probably should've been. And I enrolled, already matriculated, the University of Virginia. Sent in my money, and I got a letter in the mail on 2 May, saying, "Congratulations. The first alternate—your primary did not pass the physical. Your first and second alternate didn't pass something. You're to report on 1 July." So I gave away my money—\$300.00 deposit—I put at the University of Virginia, and came to West Point.

Interviewer

What was the Point like at that point, in the late '50s? What was life here like? It was very—more traditional, I would think, obviously.

Elliott Fishburne

It was. As a plebe—and that's the only way I can say that—first year—as a plebe, life was horrible. It's not like today. Everything at that particular time, in my opinion, was negative leadership instead of positive leadership. They tried to break you down, humiliate you, get you to quit in any way they could. But things were a little different then—we'd come up through a different culture, and I don't think quitting was really in our vocabulary at that time, even though they tried to run you out. But everything was harassment and hazing—even physical hazing—and it's much better today, much more realistic.

Interviewer

Was there much attrition from your class?

Elliott Fishburne

Very little attrition, other than in academics. We came in with 802 and graduated 601, and I would say the biggest percentage—obviously, the biggest percentage of that left after the first semester. They just couldn't make it in the academics. But I don't remember—I'm sure we lost a few people during the beast barracks summer schedule, but I don't know of anyone that left during that period. Not like today, where people come, two days later they decide it's not for them, or whatever.

Interviewer

You were telling me earlier about President John Kennedy spoke at your commencement.

Elliott Fishburne

Yes.

Interviewer

Could you tell me again?

Elliott Fishburne

Yeah, heâ€™and of course, we didnâ€™t really realize the import[ance] of his speech thenâ€™but it was nice, also, in that my company had won the best company in the brigade that particular spring. Â And we coin-flipped with the 1st Regimentâ€™I was in the 2nd Regimentâ€™my company was the honor guard company for Kennedy when he came in. Â And so we were on the Plain [USMA parade field] when his helicopter landed on the Plain, and our graduation then was down in the field houseâ€™pretty dingy place, but thatâ€™s where we were. Â And it was big enough at that time thatâ€™I donâ€™t think, other than your mother and father, almost no one ever came to graduation back then.

Interviewer

But President Kennedy gave his speech, and I donâ€™t remember it at the time, but having read the speech since then, he predicted that we, our class, will be fighting in very unconventional warfare that weâ€™d never been trained to fight in before. Â And we were going to have to be extremely resourceful and whatever, because that was just going to be what he saw as the wars of the future. Â Of course, we wereâ€™I was heading to Germany, and a lot of my classmates were heading to Hawaiiâ€™we werenâ€™t even thinking of going to war when we heard that.

Interviewer

You didnâ€™t believe him?

Elliott Fishburne

Well, I didnâ€™t believe him, but I just didnâ€™t remember. Â You know, I wasnâ€™tâ€™I was so anxious to graduate and, you know, weâ€™re within an hour of throwing the cap in the air, that I just wasnâ€™t listening all that hard. Â It was only when I read the thing afterwards. Â But I know that my classmates, we werenâ€™t even thinking of going to war; it wasnâ€™t even in our vocabulary at that time.Â

Interviewer

After you graduated, what was your first assignment?

Elliott Fishburne

I went to the 11th Army Cav in Germany, stationed in a little place called Schwaben, Germany, the regimental headquarters whereâ€™ and the 1st and the 2nd Squadron, which I was in. Â And my primary mission then was patrolling the Czech border and making sure that the Czech army didnâ€™t invade Bavaria. Â Very nice assignment, but we were on the border probably half the year, but it was a good assignment. Â

Elliott Fishburne

And then after about a year and a half, or maybe two years, they pulled the 11th Cav back

to the States. A Our squadron became the 2nd Squadron, 3rd Cav, and we were there taking the entire border mission for the 11th Cavâ€”took over their whole sector. Â And then after six or eight months, we were pulled back to Kaiserslautern, which was nothing but a depot area and not a very fun place for an armored cav unit to be stationed.

Interviewer

What was it like to be a young American officer, though, in Germany at that time?

Elliott Fishburne

Greatâ€”absolutely. Â Fun. Â You worked hard, you played hard. Â You had a great camaraderie in the units. Â Most of your social life centered around the officersâ€™ club, which wasâ€”when you werenâ€™t out patrolling the border, back then as we were, or in Grafenwieren for gun retraining, you went to the club. Â And you had happy hour every Friday; every officer in the battalion would be coming to the happy hours, and it was just a fun time but you worked hard.

Interviewer

That raises an interesting pointâ€”getting back to Kennedyâ€™s commencement addressâ€”that you were really trained for a very different war.

Elliott Fishburne

Oh, absolutely. Â We were trained forâ€”

Interviewer

You were trained for the Cold War.

Elliott Fishburne

The great tank war on the Russian plains. Â We were ready to defend the Russian division, armored divisions, coming across the plains of Eastern Germany. Â Thatâ€™s where we were. Â And thatâ€™s where we were right up until the day I went to Vietnam. Â Even in the armor advanced course at that time, we were teaching tank maneuvers and maneuvering tank battalions left and right; and we never saw any of that in Vietnam.

To Vietnamâ€”Again

Interviewer

So jumping forward in time again, what were you doing when you received your orders for your second tour in Vietnam? Â What was yourâ€”where wereâ€”

Elliott Fishburne

I wasâ€”I was at the comptrollership school in Syracuse, probably in about February or March. Â And my assignments officerâ€”we started a dialogue to see where I was going. Â He said, â€œWell, youâ€™re not due to go back to Vietnam yet, but you will be after another year. Â So I can assign you someplace for a year, but after that year, youâ€™re going back to Vietnam.â€

Interviewer

And you were a captain at that point?

Elliott Fishburne

I was a major then. Â I madeâ€”at that particular time, you made major very fast, and not because I was outstanding in any way, and I had no below-the-zone promotions. Â But I made major in six and a half years after graduation. Â Of course, then I was a major for nine years after that. Â But I was a major at Syracuse, and that was an awful experience in that that was in the height of the Vietnam protest area. Â And we hadâ€”in my class, we had 30 people, maybe 20 Army officers and 10 DA civilians.

Interviewer

DA?

Elliott Fishburne

Department of the Army civilians. Â We had to take all of our decals and anything off the cars that resembled a relationship with the Army or the military or the defense department, because if you didnâ€™t theyâ€™d just come and smash your windshield. Â They were burning the dumpsters in front of the ROTC building on campus. Â

Elliott Fishburne

We would walk around as a group; you know, they wouldnâ€™t bother us, because they were all paper tigers; but they wouldnâ€™t bother us at all. Â But that was a tough time then, because you really got so much scorn and derision all the time if you were in the military. Â But I got my assignâ€”I was talking to my assignment officer. Â He said, â€œThereâ€™s a choice, you know. Â Assignment somewhere for a year, and then Vietnam, or you can volunteer back for Vietnam.â€” Â I said, â€œOkay, well, what kind of assignment can you give me in Vietnam?â€” Â And he said, â€œWell, how about comptroller of the 5th Special Forces group?â€” Â I said, â€œThat sounds goodâ€”Iâ€™ll take it.â€”

Interviewer

What does that mean?

Elliott Fishburne

I would be the money-man controlling all the funds for the 5th Special Forces group. Â And the Special Forces operated a little bit differently in that they had bags of money, at times, where they could actually pay informants for intelligence information and that type of thing. Â So that was a little bit differentâ€”so I volunteered for that. Â Â

Elliott Fishburne

So I get to Vietnamâ€”this was in August of 1970â€”and I was at the repâ€”the replacement depot. Â And I called the assignment person and said, â€œIâ€™m here,â€” you know, â€œthis is my assignment.â€” Â And he laughed and said, â€œWell, thereâ€™s seven guys in-country that have claim to that position before youâ€™re going to get it.â€” Â So I said, â€œOkay, now letâ€™s talk about well, what are you gonna do with me, then?â€” He said, â€œWell, Iâ€™ve got an opening as the assistant G1 [personnel] of II Field Force,â€” which was at Corps headquarters. Â Lieutenant General Mike Davison was the commander of II Field Force at that time. Â And I said, â€œOkay, if thatâ€™s all you got, I will take it.â€” Â So I went to II Field Force Headquarters as the assistant G1, andâ€”in a little place called Plantation. Â Thatâ€™s where the headquarters was located, which was

just north of Long Binh. A And I stayed there for my entire 12 months.

Interviewer

As a G1, your duty was?

Elliott Fishburne

You do personnel-related measures. You do officer assignments coming in, morale welfare type of stuff, if there is any such thing. One of the things I had, I wasâ€”because I had had the comptroller training, I was the club overseer for the entire II Field Force area, which included about 16, 18 clubs, either enlisted or officersâ€™ clubs. So I had that.

Elliott Fishburne

And one of the things I gotâ€”while I was in this capacity, orders came down from the Department of the Army to get rid of all slot machines. â€”Slot machines at that time were the biggest money-maker for the systems, and really supported all the club systems. â€”But the Department of the Army decided that that was an immoral activity, and therefore weâ€™re getting rid of the slot machines. â€”So we had to collect all the slot machines, and we had just hundreds of these slot machines, and we put them all in this great yard. â€”And we threw a thermite grenade in each one of them to burn them out, and then had a tank just neutral-steer on top of them and crush them into nothingâ€”little pieces. â€”Because a slot machine at that time, if it got into Vietnam black market, was worth a lot of money, and they didnâ€™t want that to happen, so we destroyed all the slot machines. â€”That was one of the great projects that I had while there.

Interviewer

When we were talking earlier, you said at the time of your second tour, it was a very different Army.

Elliott Fishburne

Different Armyâ€”and again, I didnâ€™t command any enlisted troops at that timeâ€”didnâ€™t command anything at that time. â€”But at Plantation, even though we were not far from Long Binh in a, you know, relatively stable area, we still had guard posts. â€”We had a compound, barbed wire enclosures, and we had guard posts probably at least at every 50 yards. â€”

Elliott Fishburne

And we just had a constant problem with the enlisted men on the guard posts smoking pot, smoking anything they could get on, drinking, drunken on guard duty. â€”We wereâ€”you know, it was a rare day that we didnâ€™t have to bring someone up on charges. â€”But the biggest thing that made an impression on me was our compound was right beside the MSR, which is the main supply route from Saigon north. â€”We were located right beside it.

Interviewer

It was a highway.

Elliott Fishburne

Thatâ€™s a main highway. â€”And we would see a Vietnamese convoy come by, and youâ€™d have their trucks, theyâ€™d be on PCs [personnel carriers] or whatever, but they

would have their helmets on. A Theyâ€™d have on flak vests. A Theyâ€™d have their rifles in their hands. A They looked very military. A Well, as it proved out, they probably werenâ€™t as military as we wouldâ€™ve liked them to have been, but they looked like they were well-disciplined. A

Elliott Fishburne

You would see an American convoy come backâ€™come by. A Youâ€™d see a PC go down the road. A On top of it would be soldiers in T-shirts, no hats on, no weapons in sight, looking like they were out for a Sunday afternoon drive. A It was justâ€™it was awful to see troops that looked like that, that just didnâ€™t look like they were even part of the military. A

Elliott Fishburne

And that was the biggest thing, biggest difference betweenâ€™and I think the biggest reason for that was when I was there â€™67-â€™68, we had a mission. A We knew what the mission was. A We were in constant danger, and so there wasnâ€™t time for this. You had to be sharp or you were going to die. A By that timeâ€™â€™70-â€™71â€™our main mission was â€™letâ€™s get outta here alive. A Letâ€™s donâ€™t do anything.â€™ A There werenâ€™t any big operations going on at that time. A This is the Vietnamization processâ€™weâ€™re going to get them to do the fighting, and you donâ€™t want to be the last person killed in Vietnam. A

Elliott Fishburne

So we werenâ€™t doing much. A There was no urgency to what we were doing, and the Army just went down the pipes.

Interviewer

Did a lot of your fellow officers feel the same way?

Elliott Fishburne

Oh, yesâ€™absolutely. A Absolutely.

Interviewer

How was morale among the officers at that point?

Elliott Fishburne

Well, you know, I canâ€™t say what the morale was out in the units, â€™cause Iâ€™m sure the morale was totally different. A You know, where I was, in the particular job I was in, my position was I could be doing this job in the States, or I could be doing it somewhere else. A Unfortunately, Iâ€™m over here doing it, and itâ€™s a separation or hardship tour. A But, you know, I had a job, and one of the things thatâ€™another thing that I did wasâ€™and it didnâ€™t have much impact on national securityâ€™was I controlled all the R&R, the rest and relaxation flights to all over; every one from Vietnam. A I controlled all flights, so I wasâ€™the airlines would come and basically suck up to me, because they would get all these flights, and I would allocate the spaces out to the various divisions and do all this. A

Elliott Fishburne

And I came back on R&R; and first of all, they wanted to give me a free ticket, you know. "Don't worry, we'll take care of you," "cause I was." "No, no, I'll pay." They said, "Okay." And I said, "You can give me an aisle seat, if you want, but that's it," "nothing more than that." And on my way back, every hour that I was in the air, someone from the airline called my wife and gave her a status report of where I was coming home. So that was kind of interesting. But I was home for two weeks during that time.

Interviewer

Did you have much contact with the Vietnamese during either of your tours—either Vietnamese civilians or Vietnamese military?

Elliott Fishburne

Because I ran the club system, I had contact with probably somewhere the seamier sides. You know, we would book in Vietnamese bands. The logistics of the club system, a lot of that came through Vietnamese channels at that time, and some of the people that ran these bands and other things made offers to me that were, you know, absolutely obscene. "Why don't you come to Saigon for the weekend, and, you know, we'll take care of you." Yeah, I knew what they were doing, but that was the side of the Vietnamese. I didn't have—I had virtually no contact with Vietnamese, the Vietnamese Army, in my position, which I think was probably the better part of the society. And I had very limited [contact] with the Vietnamese populace, other than in connection with the club system.

Interviewer

How difficult was it coming home the second time?

Elliott Fishburne

Oh, it was great coming home, "cause I figured I wouldn't be going back.

Interviewer

You knew that you wouldn't have another tour.

Elliott Fishburne

Well, you know, you just sensed that it was winding down. And I went to Fort Leavenworth when I returned, to Command and General Staff College, and from there, I went to the Pentagon for four years, and I wasn't going to be put in—and of course, halfway through the Pentagon tour, it was all over, over there.

Interviewer

Did your own feelings about the war change over the course of time, in terms of whether it was winnable, whether it was wise?

Elliott Fishburne

Absolutely. The second tour over there, I just said, you know, "What are we doing here?" You know, I don't see any progress made from the first tour. Yeah, we're doing the Vietnamization, the [inaudible] thing; but I was like a lot of people that observed the Vietnamization. It looked good. It looked like they were making good progress.

A But apparently, you know, they just folded in, you know, a matter of a couple days once anything happened, so. Â But I did not see that. Â I had no idea that there could be any kind of collapse like that.

Interviewer

How many members of your class served in Vietnam, and how many were lost in Vietnam in the class of 1962, do you know?

Elliott Fishburne

I had 22 classmates killed over there, out of 601. Â A lot of my class went Air Force. Â That was in a time where we were still staffing the Air Force because the Air Force Academy had not been able to catch up and turn out enough officers yet. Â In fact, most of them during that time, most of the general officers in the Air Force were West Point graduates a lot of them. Â

Elliott Fishburne

And so when my class graduated, during the selection process they decided, you know, up to something like at least 20 percent could go Air Force. Â And a lot of the people in the top of the class wanted to go Air Force Air Force missile, or whatever. Â So what they did, they broke the class into thirds by class standing one, two, three, thirds. Â Then when you started making your branch choices, for Air Force, anyway, people that wanted to go Air Force, up to the limit, they would start with the number one man in each third and work down till they had filled the Air Force quota, to make sure that the Air Force didn't get, you know, 20 percent from the top third. Â So they spread it out through the entire class. Â

Elliott Fishburne

That was interesting, how they did that. Â I wasn't all that never even thought of going Air Force, but I had several people in my company that went Air Force.

Elliott Fishburne

And did they, just out of curiosity, did those who went Air Force I assume they ended up serving in Vietnam, many of them ended up serving in Vietnam in some capacity, too, or?

Elliott Fishburne

Not many.

Interviewer

Not many.

Elliott Fishburne

Not many. Â Most of them didn't go Air Force pilot route. Â They went Air Force missile and Air Force other things, but a lot of them didn't go and I have even classmates that went into the Army that didn't get to Vietnam. Â I don't know what the breakdown is of, you know I don't know how many didn't really go into the Army. Â Well, let's see. Â I had two tours. Â I would say half of my class, roughly, had two tours that went Army. Â Half of them had two tours; the other half had one. Â Maybe

there are a limited number that had three tours. As I had quite a few classmates that went Marine Corps. In fact, our one—we had one Medal of Honor winner in my class, and he was a posthumous Marine Corps.

Interviewer

I was unaware that you could go from Army to Marine Corps.

Elliott Fishburne

You could then. I don't know what the rule is now, but we had—I don't know how many, but we had—we must've had 15 at least that went Marine Corps. I know one got the Medal of Honor posthumously. Another one got the Navy Cross, so, you know, I don't know whether the criteria then was that you had to have had some type of lineage in the Marine Corps. I don't know that. Now, the one—I know that the person, Frank Reasoner, that was the posthumous Medal of Honor, he had been Marine Corps before coming to West Point, and he went back into the Marine Corps. In fact, he was a Golden Gloves boxing champion for the entire four years that he was here at West Point also, and had been a Marine Corps Golden Gloves before coming to West Point.

A USMA Family Tradition

Interviewer

So you went to the Pentagon and just sort of to round out your service, could you?

Elliott Fishburne

I spent four years in the Pentagon. I was in DCSPER, which is a deputy chief of staff for personnel, in that directorate. I spent three years—this was in utilization for my comptroller school—I spent three years—I was the PCS, permanent change of station, movement budget guy for the Army. I developed the PCS, the cost of the PCS budget in all kinds of travel, whatever travel, whether it was accession travel coming in, whether it was retirement travel going out, whether it was operational travel, whether it was moving people around. It was about—at that time, about a \$750 million budget.

Interviewer

PCS stands for?

Elliott Fishburne

Permanent change of station. Anyone that leaves West Point, they're going on a PCS move, as they call it—permanent change of station to somewhere else. Or coming in here, they come in on a PCS move. And so I had that budget for three years. I was the only one in the Department of the Army that knew what this budget was, how it was built, or anything else. As a result, I had to defend it before Congress, because it was always a very contentious issue. Congress always says we move people around too much, and so the budget has always been challenged. But I did that for three years, and then I was the assistant exec officer to the deputy chief of staff, personnel, for a year before going to forces command in Atlanta, Georgia, where I was in the resource, comptroller resource office there—again, working with dollar planning figures for all the forces in the United States. Did that for three years, got assigned to West Point as the treasurer here—treasury USMA—for four years I had that assignment. And my last assignment was one year under a company in Korea. I was the comptroller for the 2nd Infantry Division. I retired, and then I was the director of alumni affairs here at West Point for 21

years, retiring in 2005.A

Interviewer

You spent a good chunk of your life at West Point.

Elliott Fishburne

A good chunk of my life at West Point; my daughter went here, class of '91. My son went here, class of '94. And my granddaughter's coming in, class of '15, this summer. So we're locked in.

Interviewer

Are your kids still on active duty?

Elliott Fishburne

My daughter is; my son is not. My son got out. He was a helicopter pilot, and spent seven years in; he's now working in Chicago. And my daughter, Holly West, married a classmate of hers, Mark West. Holly has just been selected—or three years ago was selected as a permanent on the dean's staff. I think she's going to be the dean's strategic planner. She's just finished up this year her PhD at NYU.

Interviewer

So she'll be working here, too.Â

Elliott Fishburne

Yes. And her husband Mark, who is in Iraq right now, is coming back, and he's going to be the logistics officer for the athletic department, and he's also the head sprint football head coach. They have four kids, so we're locked in here.Â

Interviewer

How does the West Point of 2011 compare to the West Point of 1962?Â

Elliott Fishburne

Well, let's see. I think the cadets today are smarter than we were. They have a lot tougher academic schedule, I think, than we did. We were very, very structured back then. I mean everyone took the same course. The only elective I ever remember taking was French; you got to choose which foreign language. Otherwise, everyone took the same courses throughout, so it was a very structured program. Now, it's just, you know, they can do all kinds of things, which I think is all good. I think the cadets today are much more attuned to the military than we were. We were cadets, and really not thinking—we had very little military training when I was here.Â

Interviewer

Really.

Elliott Fishburne

Very little. We didn't have any military training other than maybe a class during the year, but we never put on fatigues—or if we call them fatigue uniforms—between the first

day of academics and the last day. We just didn't do military stuff. We would spend endless hours parade practicing. All summer, you know, they're where as far as cadets today, they do very little of that; they're out doing soldier things.

Elliott Fishburne

We just paraded all the time. We would have in the fall, we have parades twice a week, and the days you didn't have parades, you'd have parade drill, and you just endless, endless work that really doesn't you don't need all of that to put on a parade. So the cadets today have so much more military training, and they're so much more aware of the Army they're going into than we were and what lies ahead, cause and I think looking at what lies ahead for them makes them a lot more gung-ho for doing the military stuff today than we did, cause we were we were going off into a peacetime Army where we can learn as we go, instead of hitting the ground running like they have to.

Interviewer

Do you think that's an interesting point. Do you think West Point actually prepared you for a life in the military?

Elliott Fishburne

They didn't prepare us nearly as well as they do today. We didn't have many military classes, like I said earlier. We had Camp Buckner even Camp Buckner was a laid-back that was a big social event when I was here. Camp Buckner was where you had every Wednesday afternoon off. You had Saturdays and Sundays off. Your girls would come out there. You had dances all the time out in Barth Hall.

Elliott Fishburne

Now they're, you know, they might be out patrolling for two weeks at a time; so it's not the fun place that we remember, that we look back on. It's all-military, and it's good it's not quite as long as what we had. They've now shortened it, but it's more intense, but it's good. We went off on trips to various each summer after our yearling year and cow year, we went on trips around the country, as a class, to all the big military installations, all of them trying to persuade us to choose their branch. Either Fort Bliss for air defense artillery, or Fort Knox for armor, or Fort Benning, or Fort Rucker but we went and they all threw it was a big party at every location. I mean they had dances for us. They had us all fixed up with blind dates. It was a great time, but we really didn't see much military. They'd put on a firepower demonstration that was the extent of the military training that we did.

Interviewer

And you think the cadets today are more serious.

Elliott Fishburne

Oh I think they are. I think they're more serious.

Interviewer

Then like as you said, they're not going into a peacetime Army.

Elliott Fishburne

That's right. Exactly.

Unchanged
Interviewer

How do you think Vietnam changed you? How did it affect your life?

Elliott Fishburne

Well, it worked for planned parenthood—I had a kid within a year every time I came back from Vietnam, so that maybe was good, because it spread things out. But I don't really think it changed me at all. You know, some people, you know, you read about all the problems of the Vietnam vets, and all the problems they have, and I don't know of any of my classmates that have any of those problems. I just kind of feel that a lot of those problems that some of these people have, they had them before they went there, and it just amplified the problem. I don't think Vietnam really changed my life at all.

Interviewer

You had no problem—your transitions back into the States was relatively easy?

Elliott Fishburne

Very easy. I never remember ducking down when a car backfired, or—I've never had bad dreams about Vietnam. It's just a chapter that I went through, and even though I had all these officers, I can hardly remember any of the names of them, even. I just—it's just not in my—I just let that go. Whether that's good or bad, I don't know, but I just—it's just not there.

Interviewer

Have you ever been back, every thought about going back?

Elliott Fishburne

I've been invited to go back, and I've said, "I do not want to go back." I have no desire to go back. I have no desire to touchy-feely with any Vietnamese, North or South, whatever. And I've had a lot of classmates have gone back and say it was a really nice experience. They went through the Vietcong tunnels under Cu Chi; and, I don't want to see any—I don't want to know where those tunnels were that were under me and all. I don't care. So—but I just don't want to go back to Vietnam. Like when I left Vietnam the second time, I remember wheels up at Bien Hoa air base, and I said, "That's it for me on Vietnam."

Interviewer

Okay. I think that just about does it. Is there anything else you'd like to add? I think—can you think of anything you'd like to add?

Elliott Fishburne

No. You've gotten more out of me than—more than I ever even knew was there—but I enjoyed it. [End of Audio]