

Interviewer:

Good afternoon. Today is 14 May 2015, and weâ€™re sitting here with Colonel Ken Yoshitani. Sir, welcome to the West Point Center for Oral History.

Ken Yoshitani:

Well, thank you for having me.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Sir, would you please spell your name for us?

Ken Yoshitani: Yes. My last nameâ€™s spelled Y-O-S-H-I-T-A-N-I, and it means â€œhappy valley.â€

Interviewer:

Thatâ€™s very nice.

Ken Yoshitani:

Why I didnâ€™t go to Penn State I donâ€™t know, but here I am.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born, when you were born, things of that nature, please.

Ken Yoshitani:

Right. I was born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1941. Iâ€™m a third-generation Japanese-American. It was a little intrigue involved there, because when my father graduated from U.S.C., I believe in 1938, in spite of his mechanical engineering degree, could not find a job. The reason is because of the strong bias against not only the Japanese-Americans, but I think Asian-Americans in general.

So when my parents married, they went back to Japan. Thatâ€™s where my brothers and I, four of us, were born. But my parents were Americans. They were born in the U.S. So we naturally became American citizen by parentage.

And I think my parents never renounced the citizenship of either country, U.S. or Japan.

But anyway, I was born in â€™41, just before the start of the war, and my younger brother was born during the war, and one youngest was born shortly after, so we grew up during World War II. And then of course, in post-World War. And my father more than anyone else, I believe, but my parents decided to move back to U.S. in 1953 and â€™54.

Interviewer:

So what day were you born, sir? What month and day?

Ken Yoshitani:

I was born in June 20, 1941.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Ken Yoshitani:

So maybe six months before the war.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And so that mustâ€™ve been an interesting time growing up. What are your earliest memories of growing up in Japan?

Ken Yoshitani:

I can remember just a couple things from World War II, so Iâ€™d have been about four years old, or maybe not even four. I believe everyone had to dig a trench, if you will, and a cover on top of it, and I remember going into that once or twice, a few times.

And I donâ€™t remember anything else of the war. But post-World War II, there are only a few things I remember. I remember one thing distinctly was when I would run to the train where the G.I.s would be going back and forth between the Army base somewhere in interior and the city of Yokohama. My family had moved into Yokohama area.

And if you jump up and down and tell them profanities, theyâ€™ll throw candies at you. So thatâ€™s some of the routines that I still remember, you know, running to the trains. And I wonâ€™t mention the profanities, but I still remember those few words, and collecting the candies.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Now, when you were growing up, did you - when you were growing up in Japan, did you speak just Japanese, or did your parents try to teach you English? I can imagine that mustâ€™ve been a different time to have parents who were both Japanese and American.

Ken Yoshitani:

I donâ€™t recall ever speaking in English as such. I know both my parents were bilingual. But our family during World War II did not stay in Tokyo. I recall sometime - I donâ€™t recall. My parents, and in fact, my mother told us that in March or April or May, after the bombing of Tokyo started, a lot of people left.

And we moved to a prefecture called Fukushima. Thatâ€™s where the tsunamis and the nuclear plant accident occurred - and spent better part of, I donâ€™t know, maybe six month or a year, whatever. So we didnâ€™t really experience intensive bombing throughout the spring of 1945.

My father remained, but my mother and all of my brothers left.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And what was it like after the Americans came to Japan?

Ken Yoshitani:

I donâ€™t know that I ever recall anything bad. We were still kids, five years, between five and ten, and you know American G.I.s are pretty generous about everything, so like giving you candy, so this and that.

So I donâ€™t know that I have any negative experience relative to the Americans.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And then when you moved back to the States in 1953 or â€™54 time frame, where did you all go?

Ken Yoshitani:

So our family moved to East Los Angeles. Itâ€™s called Boyle Heights, and we stayed there for a couple-three years, as I recall. My older brother and I went to junior high school, and then my younger brothers went to a grade school nearby. And then shortly thereafter, my father went back to Japan to earn some living wages.

And we moved to West Los Angeles, and I went to a high school called Hamilton High School.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. What were your interests when you were in high school?

Ken Yoshitani:

Well, typical teenagers, I suppose, Iâ€™m sure. I participated in sports, and did a few things in academics, and go after the girls, and we went to movies. I would say pretty typical - nothing unusual.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. So howâ€™d you become interested in West Point?

Ken Yoshitani:

This is somewhat embarrassing for me to say this, but my parents were not well-to-do, although my father, by the time I was in high school, senior high school, had come back from Japan and decided to work for a company called General Petroleum, which is a subsidiary of Mobil, which subsequently became Exxon-Mobil. But we were Iâ€™d venture to say at best lower middle class.

And struggling to make a living, and with four kids, my fatherâ€™s mandate was, â€œOkay, you guys - you all go to college, but you have to pay your own way through.â€ Back in â€™50s, thatâ€™s possible, and thatâ€™s what we decided to do. But given the word from my father saying, â€œHey, you got to go to school, but you got to pay your own way,â€ you look around for scholarship and any way to go to college.

I was a very poor student, and so a scholarship was out of the question. So there was a catalog in our high school library, U.S.M.A. or West Point, whatever it was. I looked at it

only because it was there, and I knew that thatâ€™s essentially a four-year scholarship. So I did write to a Congressman, and his name was James Roosevelt, son of Franklin Delano, I believe - or maybe a nephew. Anyway, last name was Roosevelt - who wrote me back and said, â€œItâ€™s all filled,â€ and â€œSorry, but I cannot help you.â€ So that was that, and I went to U.C.L.A.

At that time, University of California, whether itâ€™s Berkeley or Los Angeles or elsewhere, allowed admittance if you had a B average in high school. Thatâ€™s it, B average in high school. I was barely able to get a B average, because I got Aâ€™s in physical education. Had I not gotten it, I could never have gotten into U.C.L.A.

But I did go to U.C.L.A., and I went to U.C.L.A. for two years, but particularly the second year, money became an overriding issue. I worked in the summer and I worked during the academic years, but it was not - it was difficult to pay the tuition and the books and the lab fees and so forth.

So I was really thinking of stopping or quitting, or leaving for a while and earning enough money. But during my fall of sophomore year, I receive a letter from Congressman King, Cecil King - I think he was the Seventh District of California - who apparently had gotten a letter from Congressman Roosevelt.

He passed that letter on, and so I received an unsolicited letter from Congressman King asking me if I was still interested. And at that time, you know, youâ€™re really in the bottom of - well, I wouldnâ€™t say I was depressed, but I was worried about the money, and having your landlords come every other week, you know, looking for rent payment that I hadnâ€™t paid.

So I said, â€œWhy not?â€ And so I did take a couple tests, but I also asked for Iâ€™m going to use the word National Defense Student Loan, or something of that nature, and took out the money, and I remember it was \$1,000.00. Weâ€™re talking about 1960. And promptly used that \$1,000.00 to buy ticket to go to Germany.

Iâ€™m going to have a last fling before I quit the college and start working. And my goal in my life was to become a draftsman. At that time, California had a great aerospace industry. It has gone downhill quite a bit since then, but. So a draftsman would make a decent living, especially when you are single and so forth and so on.

Anyway, thatâ€™s what I did, and lo and behold, in between there were some tests, and so forth and so on, and I had bought the tickets to Germany and I made arrangements with a couple other guys to travel from Los Angeles to New York. And I got a letter from someone - maybe from West Point - that Iâ€™d gotten an appointment.

So that was Iâ€™m going to say late in spring. Iâ€™m going to say like May. So I canceled the trip, and prepared to come to West Point, and I donâ€™t know when the R Day was. R Day must be in the end of June, early July. To my credit, by the way, I did use up that \$1,000.00 for doing this and that.

Even to come to West Point I mustâ€™ve used that money. But I paid that back, \$1,000.00, Iâ€™m going to say within a year, or certainly by two years. So I donâ€™t have any guilt about it, misusing, misappropriating the money.

Interviewer:

What sort of classes did you take when you were at U.C.L.A., and how well did that prepare you for the academics at West Point?

Ken Yoshitani:

I was pursuing a pre-med course, and so it was a mix of physical science and life science and humanities courses. Especially first year, U.C.L.A. wanted to have a freshman take all kinds of humanities courses - English classes, history class, foreign language, and so forth. But I also did take chemistry and mathematics and so forth.

Interviewer:

Okay. And how did you find life at West Point for a Plebe, or a freshman?

I think the discipline aspect of the life was probably the most difficult. On academics, I had advantage of having gone to college for two years, so I found the academics to be easier. And because I was repeating, repeating calculus and - I guess I did not take chemistry. I did

take physics, and so many of the so-called S-T-E-M classes, you know, the science and mathematics classes, were repeat for me, which is a great benefit to me, because as I said, I'm a poor student. I'm a slow learner.

So second time around was very, very beneficial.

Interviewer:

And how was life at the Academy? You said the discipline was strict. Can you describe a little bit of that for me?

Ken Yoshitani:

Well, I think for us to get up 6:00 in the morning and they start yelling, you know, calling out the minutes, and bracing most of the time, and so forth, I think is not something that most of us were used to, or haven't experienced.

So - but I think I managed. I'm sure I do my share of demerits, but I never did walk the area, nor was I confined, so maybe I was just too timid. I just followed the rules. But I can see even then, even among during the Plebe year, there was a rapport with my roommates and classmates in my Company in particular, so.

Interviewer:

On that, your class seems to have a very strong bond. Tell me a little bit about your class and the people you used to hang out with as a Cadet.

Ken Yoshitani:

I don't know that there's anything in particular that I can tell, except that I still have a connection with them after 50 years, both Company M-2, which is the first two years, and B-2, my last two years. My roommate for first two years became my family's lawyer, and helped my parents, and we still correspond.

And many other guys in M-2 I still relate as well as in B-2.

Interviewer:

Do any names particularly stand out to you, guys that you used to associate with, or the fellow that became your family's lawyer?

Ken Yoshitani:

His name is Tim O'Hara. Very devout Catholic, and I'm probably closer to atheist than anything else, so I used to give him a hard time, and he was not prepared to defend his Catholicism. But he was a great swimmer. I think he was a better swimmer than Buddy Bucha.

But his younger brother Kerry - he's the class of '63, I believe, or '64, two years afterwards. I'm sorry, I was '65, so he must be '67 - I'm sorry. I think his younger brother broke every record that Tim broke. And his family is interesting. Tim and Kerry are great athletes, great swimmers, but they were not good swimmers from his family. His family's best swimmer was Maureen, the youngest daughter, and had she come to West Point, I'm sure she would've broken all the women's swimming records. She eventually became an Olympian, not in swimming but in winter sports.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Ken Yoshitani:

So anyway, so Tim O'Hara. From B-2, my classmate who was my roommate was Tom Borkowski - passed away last year, and *I just finished his M.A.* Others, I mean - well, I can remember like a Stichweh - not necessarily a buddy as such, but he was in my Company. Manny Maimone, whose wife we're escorting. Manny passed away oh, maybe ten-plus years ago, maybe even longer, from Lou Gehrig disease. Ed Simpson, *Harry Joyner*, Rich Leary.

I think there still are 15 of us, or 15 or 17 of us, alive, and we lost 2 - when I say lost, we can't communicate with them. But the remaining 15, we regularly communicate and send e-mails and know what they're doing and so forth.

Interviewer:

I heard there's a story about one of the classes you were in where one of your

professors, who was an Air Force Officer, talked about bombing Japan during World War II.

Ken Yoshitani:

Right.

Interviewer:

Could you tell me that story?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes. During my Cow year, I was taking quantum mechanics, and the instructor was a Air Force Lieutenant Colonel. I can picture his face even today. I just don't remember his name, and I haven't bothered to check with the Department of Physics to see who that person was. But it would be spring of 1964.

And one day he comes in, and they said, "Today's a very important day." So there are 10, 12 of us in the class. Of course, we didn't understand what he was talking about. And then he went on to explain that on that particular day 20 years earlier, I suppose - '64, right - that it was his first combat mission over Japan.

And of course, he was probably in B-29 and dropped the bombs, and essentially that's what his group did. Of course, you know, when he said that, and I knew about the time when my family moved from Japan because of our intensive bombing of the Tokyo site, I told him, "You know, sir, I was down there." And explained to him that my family didn't move until say a month or so later.

And I think that kind of - I wouldn't say shocked him, but gave him kind of a realization that here, you know, he came into the classroom fat, dumb, and happy, and he was happy about the fact that I'm alive, and I did something good for my country, and so forth and so on. I'm sure he felt that way - and yet there was another side to that.

And when I had mentioned that, it really - I don't want to use the word struck him - but I think it made him think about, "My goodness, life have many interesting turns."

Interviewer:

It showed him the human dimension -

Ken Yoshitani:

Right.

Interviewer:

Of what he couldn't see from thousands of feet up in the air.

Ken Yoshitani:

As it turned out, I have a couple other, a few other classmates who have gone through war years in Germany. Last name I think Hennig, Rich Hennig - or is it Guenter - Guenter Hennig and Ed Zavka - and those guys lived through World War II also, on the other side.

Interviewer:

Now, did you all share those stories with each other when you were Cadets?

Ken Yoshitani:

I did not talk to Guenter or Ed. I knew that they had lived in Germany. I did not share that.

Interviewer:

You also had a couple other Japanese classmates, correct?

Ken Yoshitani:

There were four Japanese-Americans graduate from '65. One is a turn-back. He was actually class of '64 and he got turned-back to '65, and the guy became the Chief of Staff of the Army later on. I didn't know that, by the way, that he was a turn-back. The other one, the other two are Tad Ono, who was appointed from New York.

And he's also similar to me in that I believe he was born in Japan, raised in Japan, and his family moved back to the U.S. So he was appointed from California - I mean New York - my appointment was in California. And the other fellow is *Jim Yashiro* from Hawaii. Class of '64 had three or four, one of which was Ric Shinseki.

And '65 had three or four, and subsequent classes had, you know, two, three, four also. But class of '65 had four Japanese-American graduated. There were four African-Americans also, and perhaps four or five or so what I would call Hispanic as well.

Interviewer:

How large was your class, sir?

We started around almost 800, and I believe we graduated like 500, if I'm not mistaken - just under 500. So I entered in '61, 15 years after the war. So I have been asked about whether or not I experienced any racial prejudice in West Point.

And the only racial incident I can remember is by Captain Ellis, who taught mechanics, and Captain Ellis looked at me. "Mr. Yoshitani" - they don't call you "Cadet." Do they still call "Mr."?

Interviewer:

Not so much.

Ken Yoshitani:

Okay. "Mr. Yoshitani, where are you from?" I says, "Sir, my domicile is Connecticut," 'cause my parents had moved from California. And Captain Ellis said, "Damn, they've got all kinds of Yankees nowadays, don't they?" I cracked up. That's the only racial comment or whatever it is that I have experienced.

By the way, Captain Ellis was a great instructor, and I did well in his class.

Interviewer:

Now, they didn't have majors back then, correct, or did they?

Ken Yoshitani:

No, they did. I know my thermodynamics was *Major Stevens*.

Oh - I mean academic majors. Did you - like for example, I majored in history.

Ken Yoshitani:

Oh - I'm sorry, no. We were all in general engineering.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Ken Yoshitani:

B.S. in general engineering, right.

Interviewer:

Was that your focus was engineering?

Ken Yoshitani:

I like engineering classes. I did well enough in physical science and engineering classes, and my thermodynamics was Major Stevens. And also mechanics of fluids was of - who later on became a General - but by name of John Bard. I think Bard was also Commandant, if I'm not mistaken.

He was an Infantry Officer, and I remember he was not only Infantry Officer, taught mechanics of fluids, but he was also a Rhodes Scholar, if I'm not mistaken. And anyway, he was really, really a interesting instructor, and I know later on he became either a Brigadier General or Major General.

I didn't - I don't know why he didn't become a Chief of Staff. He had that kind of ability. But many of the classes I really enjoyed. I enjoyed language classes, history classes, social science classes. I liked the civil engineering - you know, we designed this and that.

And I remember one of the instructors I recall, *Levi Brown*, who helped design the small nuclear power plant in Alaska, which the Army had owned. Elliot, *Roberge*, Miller - I guess I can think of others.

One very interesting instructor was - I think he was a Major, but he may have been a Captain. His name was Bell, B-E-L-L, and he taught economics, very first class in. And he would always tell a Cadet near the door to pull the shade down, because he's going to have a riot in the class and he doesn't want people in the hallway to see that we're having a party every time.

But - and he taught great classes. As I look back, the quality of instructors - they may not have been PhDs, but I think that most importantly, because they were only teaching at the undergraduate level, they really don't need to be a PhDs, they really don't. A master's degree is more than enough.

But to come to the class, be prepared, and enthusiastically giving the instruction I think speaks volumes, I think. I don't really see that kind of quality and enthusiasm among the instructional staff elsewhere.

I eventually went to M.I.T. and then also University of Chicago's Business School. But the - I don't remember who the instructors are at M.I.T. or at Chicago, but I still remember these young Captains and Majors teaching concrete and physics and German and law and so forth.

Interviewer:

So they made a big impression on you.

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah. I may be more impressionable when you're 20, but I still remember them. Yeah.

Interviewer:

What you just said reminded me of something. Having gone to college for two years prior to West Point, you were a couple years more mature than some -

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Most of your classmates. Did you feel that benefitted you any?

Ken Yoshitani:

Well, I don't know about the maturity, but having had the classes once before was a big benefit to me. As I said, I'm a plodder, and I learn things slowly, so going through the same course twice was a big benefit.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And it seems like you enjoyed your time spent at the Academy.

Ken Yoshitani:

I certainly after the Plebe year. Things got really, really much better, as I did.

Interviewer:

How was the summer training for you?

Ken Yoshitani:

I think the only disappointing summer training would be the Cow year, after the Yearling year, you spent like two, three weeks here at West Point, going through the map training. I think that was a bit of a disappointment, maybe for two reasons. One, we were all anxious to get out. And two, it was classroom.

I think we should've gone out to Camp Buckner or wherever to really learn about map-making and map-reading.

Interviewer:

And when it came time for branching, what did you pick?

Ken Yoshitani:

I chose engineering, because I suppose I did well enough in engineering classes. I didn't really think about other branches. By the way, can I come back to academics?

Interviewer:

Of course.

Ken Yoshitani:

There was one other disappointment, and I even detected that when I was even a Cadet, but certainly later on I felt it very strongly, and that is, for whatever reason, I guess I was doing well enough that they put me in a so-called honors class in ordnance engineering. And I didn't learn too much about ordnance.

We were doing some things that I don't even remember, but I really felt that I missed out by taking so-called honors course, and doing something that I don't really remember what I learned. And I should've learned about explosives, and ammunitions, and schematics of how the bullets in there, and artillery shells traveling.

And the mortars, and how tanks move from point A to point B. That's all ordnance engineering - pretty unique. You're not going to learn that at M.I.T. And so by the time I went to a Second Lieutenant, yeah, I had some inkling about how a truck can move from

point A to point B.

But I think I really missed out not having that ordnance engineering. You know, I think ordnance engineering taught mortars, and explosives, and ammunitions, and perhaps communications and so forth. All these technical equipment aspect of Army. And I think - I understand ordnance engineering is no longer taught here.

Interviewer:

Iâ€™m not sure, sir.

Ken Yoshitani:

And I think thatâ€™s - I think they may want to revisit that, because so many of West Pointers or graduates from this institution no longer study science and mathematics and engineering. They become history majors. Not that history majors is bad.

But I think if you want to be good Company-grade Officers, I think you need to know what an engine does or does not do.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

Ken Yoshitani:

So. Anyway, thatâ€™s my two centsâ€™ worth.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Upon graduation you were posted somewhere. Can you tell me a little bit about where your first assignment was?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes. We all went through Airborne and Ranger School, and then my first post was with the Third Engineering Battalion of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry Division in West Germany. We were in Munich, and so I reported in in Iâ€™m going to say January.

And I can remember my Company Commander was a *Steve Bakalarski*, class of â€™63, and my XO *Harvey Boone*, class of â€™64, two really fine Officers. I still remember them well. But very, very shortly there, Iâ€™m going to say certainly within a year, if not six months, they were in an extensive draw-down.

And not only the Officers, but also the senior Non-Commissioned Officers, were drawn down to go to Vietnam. Our class, for whatever reason - class of â€™64 and â€™65 - did not go through the Officers Basic Course.

Someone who is really bright thought that these graduates from West Point are smart enough that they can learn on the job. I think that was a mistake, of course, and starting class of â€™66, all the graduates started to go back to the Basic Course. But those two Officers and many of the senior NCOs were really gone.

And I recall within a year of reporting to the unit - and I was still a Second Lieutenant - taking over the Company. First Sergeant was Staff Sergeant.

And that was not a effective learning experience. You learned because youâ€™re making mistakes left and right, but - and looking back, Iâ€™m not sure that we had an effective Seventh - was it a Seventh Army still then?

I donâ€™t know - where the U.S. Army could really effectively block. Because our unit, Third Engineer Battalion, was no different than other units, other branches. And if we were depleted like we were, Iâ€™m not sure that we were really an effective fighting force.

Interviewer:

And because your mission at the time was to stop the Soviets if they came across the border, correct?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Wow. That mustâ€™ve been something as a Second Lieutenant.

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah. I donâ€™t know that as a Second Lieutenant that you had that awareness. We had an alert, and we deployed, but we werenâ€™t quite sure what to do afterwards. But we

knew which bridges you have to go to, and which bridges you were on, and blow it up. But I think concern that I had even then was whether or not guys can even prepare the explosives and be able to blow up the village.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Ken Yoshitani:

Because Squad Leaders who are SPEC-4s and PFCs, so.

Interviewer:

Now, were you married at this time?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes, I was.

Interviewer:

Okay. So you finally got your trip to Germany.

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And when did you get married?

Ken Yoshitani:

Oh - three days after graduation.

Interviewer:

Okay. Tell me a little bit about where you met your wife.

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah. So I met my wife during my freshman year at U.C.L.A. She was exchange student from Japan to high school that I graduated from, and her sponsoring family thought that this girl from Japan needs to have someone who can speak Japanese, so they somehow arranged for us to meet.

And I don't know whether we were romantically involved in the very beginning, but certainly by the first year, Plebe year was when I thought a lot of her. And so we were married Friday - graduation was Wednesday, 50 years ago.

Interviewer:

And where did you get married?

Ken Yoshitani:

At the Cadet Chapel.

Interviewer:

Okay. And so that makes you 2% Club, right? You dated all through West Point?

Ken Yoshitani:

I think so, yes. And we're still married, and I think at this class reunion, all of us will be 50 year anniversary, so - there are quite a few of us.

Interviewer:

Well, congratulations.

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah, congratulations to all of us.

Interviewer:

Yeah, exactly - that's wonderful.

Ken Yoshitani:

We're hanging - hang together for 50 years.

How did your wife like Germany?

Ken Yoshitani:

I think she had a tougher time than I did, in that it was a first - she was still Japanese, not Japanese-American, so she had that to overcome. And then to become a Army wife was another obstacle in itself. So I think she probably had a little tougher time than I did. She did have friends, and she did start to go to take language courses from University in Munich, and so forth.

And we did travel here and there, as a Second Lieutenant's money allowed.

Interviewer:

And did you speak German?

Ken Yoshitani:

I did.

Interviewer:

Is that the language you took as a Cadet?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes - not well, though. I wish I had taken more serious about it. And I think looking back, having four full years of foreign language is probably more beneficial than taking quantum mechanics.

Interviewer:

And how long were you in Germany?

Ken Yoshitani:

I believe it was a year and a half.

Interviewer:

Okay. And then what did you do after Germany?

Ken Yoshitani:

Then I was transferred to Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Okay. And where did your wife go? Did she -

Ken Yoshitani:

So she went back to Japan to stay with my parents and her parents. By that time, my father was I guess advancing well enough, and then MobilTMs sending him to Japan to work with the Japanese partner in petrochemical industry.

And as it turned out, coincidentally, after my wife and I had gotten married, and of course, our parents did not know each other until we were married. And her fatherTMs, or my father-in-lawTMs, company appointed him to be the Managing Director of the joint venture with Mobil.

So and then Mobil sent my father as one of the four or five engineers representing Mobil.

So they began to work together. But after a few years, I think my father was tired of living in Japan. Living in the U.S. is infinitely more easier, if you will.

So he was ready to leave, wanted to leave, but my father-in-law asked Mobil to have my father remain in Japan work in the joint venture by name. So he stayed on for a few more years, but my wife and I are both very glad that they were able to work together, and they traveled together, and they enjoyed themselves, so.

We had I think our parents, both sets of parents, had a terrific relationship, which we -

Interviewer:

ThatTMs very nice.

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

When you went to Vietnam, where were you stationed, and who were you with?

Ken Yoshitani:

Oh, anyway, so my wife went back and went to work for a British Embassy in Tokyo. I was sent to Fifteenth Engineering Battalion of Ninth Infantry Division.

Interviewer:

Okay, the old reliables, right?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes. And first six months or so, we were in Bearcat, and we worked northeast of Saigon. And I was a Battalion Maintenance Officer for six months, and at that time, our Battalion had maybe 8, 10, 12 so-called Rome plows.

ItTMs essentially a DC7, or maybe even bigger, Cat dozer thatTMs equipped with a blade with a essentially is it horn, or something like that, sticking out on the one end, so

that the blade can penetrate and split the trees in half.

And it was an interesting time to keep this equipment going. Very, very inefficiently, though.

Interviewer:

Why inefficiently?

Ken Yoshitani:

Because so many of the critical repair parts were being scrounged. So youâ€™d go to this big depot in Long Binh, and looking for the parts, and it should not work that way. Maybe the depot operation wasnâ€™t effective to pass on the needed repair parts and supplies and other things.

Interviewer:

So this mustâ€™ve been about 1967 time frame?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes. And then after that, I was given A Company of 15th Engineer Battalion. As it turned out, maybe a week before the Tet Offensive.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Ken Yoshitani:

And on the day of the Tet Offensive, we move from Bearcat to what is then called Dong Tam. Ninth Division moved to the Delta. So I had to convoy the Company from Bearcat to Dong Tam, which is not a long drive. I think itâ€™s about a few hours.

But my lead Platoon got lost, and here weâ€™re kind of wandering around in the south part of Saigon, not knowing that the northwest part of Saigon is under attack. But we moved through, fat, dumb and happy, not knowing whatâ€™s going on, and arrived, got to Dong Tam.

Amazing.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Ken Yoshitani:

Amazing how ignorant we were. But I guess we were lucky, too, for that matter.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. How was your deployment to Vietnam that time?

Ken Yoshitani:

Excuse me, I didnâ€™t -

Interviewer:

How did the rest of the deployment go for you? Did you do engineer missions the whole time?

Ken Yoshitani:

You know, we were a Divisional Combat Engineering Unit. Itâ€™s a pick and shovel, and well, basically sappers. So typically my Company - other line Company as well - one Company was in essentially direct support of the Brigade, and they go with some of the units of the Brigade.

Second Platoon was taking care of their roads. Essentially what we did was we fly every morning to see if there are craters, and if there are craters, then you follow that up with the dump trucks full of rocks and sand, and fill up the craters. And the third Platoon was building within the base - barracks and TOCs and whatever else.

So my Company, during the time I was a Company Commander, did lose a couple guys, KIAs, and I donâ€™t know how many, but a couple dozen from wounds and had to be evacuated. But nothing like Infantry units.

Iâ€™m sure those guys lost dozens in one operation, and when they fly back in, theyâ€™re - I canâ€™t imagine that the Company Commanders had to really endure that kind of loss. Iâ€™m sure it was tough on them. I have a high, high regards for the Infantry units, and also in Vietnam at that time did have Armor and Cav units as well.

Interviewer:

Did you have many interactions with the Vietnamese citizens?

Ken Yoshitani:

Only those who are working with us as help and kitchen and in the barracks area, first tour. In the second tour, I did have quite a few working in the asphalt plant in the rock crushers, and so on.

Interviewer:

Who were you with on your second tour?

Ken Yoshitani:

I was with the 554th Engineering Battalion, which is a construction, and with the 1st Engineer Brigade, which may have been reorganized and downsized, or downgraded. My second tour, my Battalion was in a place called Bao Loc -

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Ken Yoshitani:

Which is on the south end of the Central Highlands.

Interviewer:

Okay. And what year was this?

Ken Yoshitani:

That was '71, '72.

Interviewer:

Okay. What would you say are the biggest differences between the time frame you were in Vietnam the first time versus the second time, and perhaps the biggest difference in terrain in those two areas, 'cause I know they're drastically different.

Ken Yoshitani:

Well, I'm not sure the terrain is that critical to what we had to do. One is delta and the other one is Central Highlands. But I can tell you the difference between the two tours in terms of quality of our troops, and with the 15th Engineering Battalion.

We were really focused on fighting, and I didn't have any disciplinary problems. I did a few here and there. But my second tour, I'm sure I'm exaggerating when I say 90% of my troops were using at least something - marijuana, or some heavier stuff. And we had fraggings. I didn't experience, but the NCOs did.

We had AWOLs who come back after three months. In fact, one particular fellow came back on the last day that we were leaving the base. How in the heck did he know? We threw him in the can. We had parents who wrote me back saying that their son sent the marijuana home.

And they opened it and it was marijuana, so the parents said that I should throw him in the jail, and I did. That kind of thing was kind of rampant. They didn't throw the live grenades, but they threw the smoke grenades and that kind of thing all the time.

Interviewer:

As a symbol, as a kind of 'we could get you if we wanted to' sort of thing?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah, that kind of a - yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay. And did you notice any difference in the Vietnamese citizens in the two different times you were there?

Ken Yoshitani:

So only one time when I felt really mad toward a Vietnamese was when I went into PX, and the sales girl, and I asked for film, and that sales girl, I saw looked at me, and I saw that and I'm obviously an Asian.

And instead of placing that Kodak film on the counter and say, 'Captain, this is \$2.00,' or whatever it was, she flipped it on the counter. So I picked it up, and threw it back at her face, grab her hair, and took her to the manager of the PX.

And I told that manager that I wanted her fired. That was the only time - only negative bad experience I had with a Vietnamese.

Interviewer:

So being Asian, as you say, physically appearing Asian, did you notice any racism from the Vietnamese as another Asian serving in the American Army?

Ken Yoshitani:

You know, Army, in my opinion - I like to say entire military, but I'm not sure that I can speak for maybe an Air Force and Marines. But Army is most equitable organization, and I can honestly say I serve in active for 9 years and in Reserve for about 18 or 19 more. I did not experience one incident of what I would call racially motivated remarks or actions or this or that. I just can't recall.

Interviewer:

Except for the Vietnamese girl who -

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah, and what can I say? She was probably 18-year-old girl who didn't know very much.

Interviewer:

Do you think your soldiers were affected by the unrest back home on your second tour?

Ken Yoshitani:

I think they were. We didn't talk about it, though, but in the news it was rampant, and I'm sure that it was not a positive motivation for them. Like so many others, I personally felt animosity when I came back.

Interviewer:

When did you come back?

Ken Yoshitani:

Well, first time was 1968, and from there I went to Fort Belvoir, so even there was still unrest as such, you know, I didn't feel that kind of a - not a negative feeling, but I wasn't really that concerned about what the country's doing.

But the second time coming back, I was kind of disappointed. But I'm not unique. I mean so many others felt and were even treated a lot worse than I was.

Interviewer:

Can you give me some examples of how you were treated when you came back?

Ken Yoshitani:

Well, you know, as you walk through say airport in your uniform, it's - instead of being a neutral person or even nowadays, a lot of servicemen are given a pat on the back, are given encouragement or appreciation and so forth and so on, you feel that animosity. But I guess by that time, I guess I was mature enough to realize that a good part of the American public was not in support of a war effort. I'm very much appreciative of what we are doing now.

That whatever we're doing in Iraq and Afghanistan, it's not something responsibility of the military, and the military is following the direction of political leadership. We're not there to cause problems as such. We're suffering the death and wounded and so forth and so on.

But the American public realizes that, and they show appreciation to the servicemen, and I think that's really great.

Interviewer:

What stands out in your mind most about your two tours in Vietnam?

Ken Yoshitani:

I think I - I don't think I felt this when I was there. I was too young, really, and even my second tour, although I would begin to mature there. But what I feel about our involvement in Vietnam, and also in Afghanistan and Iraq, is that if you're going in, we need to make a commitment to reach the goal that we set at the beginning.

And so in Vietnam - not so much Iraq and Afghanistan, because I did not fight in that war. So in Vietnam, one of the biggest regret I have is the fact that I was on the losing team. And not only are we a losing team - it's okay if you fought and lost. But when National Command, or President and Secretary of Defense -

particularly Secretary of Defense, even from the very beginning thought that this was not a winnable war, and he sends - I guess we peaked at a little over 530,000 servicemen in Vietnam. For Secretary of Defense to know that, and yet going ahead and sustaining casualty of 55, 60,000 I think is unconscionable.

And I cannot forget or condone both the President and Secretary of Defense in the roles that they played. Yeah, so that's my regret, that I guess I was a part of a losing team. I don't know if that kind of feeling exists among the guys who fought in Iraq and Afghanistan. I think a lot of guys in Iraq feel that way, because we packed up and left, and they may feel the same about Afghanistan.

We're professional soldiers, and I think we want to win.

Interviewer:

Yes, I think you're right. When you got back from Vietnam, what did you do afterwards?

Ken Yoshitani:

Well, after first tour I was sent back to graduate school, and after the second tour, I was sent to run a nuclear power plant in Panama. It's a floating nuclear power plant. And after my resignation I went to work for a company called Fluor Corporation, in Chicago office.

And that office was involved in designing and construction of nuclear power plants.

Interviewer:

Okay. What year did you get out?

Ken Yoshitani:

I was out '74.

Interviewer:

Okay. So by this time, your wife was back, and you had at least one child, correct?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes. I think we had two by then.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

And in addition to working for the nuclear power plant, did you remain in the Reserves?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yes. I rejoined the Reserves maybe after three years. The reason I waited was because I wanted to go to business school.

Interviewer:

Right.

Ken Yoshitani:

So I finished up business school in about three years, and then rejoined Reserve after that. But during those period of time, I never did resign from the Reserve. I was in so-called Individual Ready Reserve or something like that.

Interviewer:

Exactly.

Ken Yoshitani:

So I maintained affiliation. One of my claim to fame in Army is I am possibly longest serving Captain. I think I was a Captain for well over ten years - longer than Dwight Eisenhower.

Interviewer:

So what did you do in the Reserves?

Ken Yoshitani:

I was in the Operations Section, and in an Engineering Section, and I was on a Chief of Staff, and so forth and so on - nothing in particular. And by the time the Gulf War came around, our unit, 416th Engineer Command, was split in two parts. One part is a TOE in support of Third Army. The other part was support of Operations and Maintenance and

Construction of Reserve Centers throughout the U.S.

And I guess because of my background in engineering, they put me in the Facilities Group for last four or five years. So when the war came, I was in Facilities Group, and not in the TOE or the Combat side, so I did not deploy to Iraq or Kuwait.

Had I done so, even for one year, I think I would have lost my Company. I've heard of some sad stories amongst the Reservists.

Interviewer:

So tell me a little bit about your Company, then.

Ken Yoshitani:

So I left Fluor Corporation after working for them five years and started my own with three other guys, four of us. And after two years, we split up, and I went on my own, and so I started by myself, and that was 1983, I believe.

And we were involved, and I was basically a mechanical engineer, so we provided mechanical and electrical engineering for a building. Building means building the structure that has four walls and the roof and a floor.

We were involved in some of the interesting projects, but I sold the company eventually in 2007, to one of my competitors, and by that time it became to be about 60-man consulting engineering company. So it took a while to grow, but it grew from 1 to 60.

In between, I was working with - well, serving with a Reserve unit. I was prepared to give you a couple regrets of my life, and I want to tell you that.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

Ken Yoshitani:

One of the regret that I already said about being on the losing team. I wouldn't be surprised if many of us feel the same way, that God, you know, especially looking at those poor people in Saigon trying to get on the helicopter. That's really a sad, sad scene.

The second regret that I have is I was so focused on engineering, on the technical side, that I think I forgot the humanity side. And even though I got a M.B.A. in business side of it, I don't think I studied.

I wish I had studied humanity subjects, became a little better person earlier in my life, as opposed to finally realizing my drawbacks or weakness at age 70. I think regret is that I wish I had this kind of awareness when I was age 30 or 35 as opposed to 70.

What I mean by that is subjects such as history, language, literature, music, psychology.

Subject which we all can lump together as so-called humanity, as opposed to technical - engineering and science. I think we should have - I certainly feel I should have had that kind of exposure earlier, and became a better person earlier in my career, as opposed to - not that I'm a better person now at age 74.

But I wish I had that kind of awareness say 30 years, 40 years earlier.

Interviewer:

Well sir, if you want to, could you take your regrets, and maybe transition it to advice for young Cadets. What advice would you give today's Cadets, knowing the world they're facing, and knowing that we have some Cadets just about ready to graduate out of the class of 2015, your 50-year affiliate?

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah. If I can relate my own experience, and that is the learning process that I didn't particularly follow, I think I was, I became a reasonably good engineer, especially in the construction field. By the time I was 50 or 55, I had a pretty good competence, and I can build anything.

But in so doing, I forgot about what I would call human aspect of a person that I think should have. I'm not sure that I was a better person as such, even though I became a reasonably good engineer.

I think that's the part that I would like to tell the Cadets, that, "Look, guys, you know you can become a great Engineer Officer, or you can become a great Signal Officer, or you can become a great Infantry Officer. But broaden your horizon and learn about other things,

and be humbled that there are a lot of things that you need to learn.

So-called good person, that goodness is not necessarily associated with wealth, or rank, or fame. You really find a good person really anywhere, male or female.

And that I think West Point's teaching of a broad liberal and technical subject is a great start, but that start should continue. I guess that's - I'm not sure that I'm explaining that well enough.

But that's the kind of things I have about being able to tell, if I were asked to -

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

Ken Yoshitani:

To give unsolicited advice to the class of 2015, or the younger future Cadets, that keep learning, and don't stop learning, I guess.

Interviewer:

Keep learning and don't - and broaden your horizons.

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Now, your son followed in your footsteps by attending West Point, and how is that for him?

Ken Yoshitani:

I would ask that question myself. I'm not sure that - one thing he did do - and we have two sons. They both went. At least Shaw has took the big step of going through business school, so at least for him, that's opened up. Both he - oh wait, no - I guess he's the only one.

He has the advantage of being able to have a second career. He's about 45 now, and you know he's going to work another 20 years, and he can take the first 20 years of the Army, and take that to a great advantage to the second career that he's going to undertake, whatever that may be. Our second son, I'm not sure where he'll be. I don't know that - it's hard, at least I find it hard for me to tell my sons, "You should do this." They probably won't listen.

Interviewer:

Is there the potential for a third generation Yoshitani at West Point?

Ken Yoshitani:

We have two grandsons, and I'm not sure that they're - you know they've lived all their lives at West Point, except for perhaps two or three years at Fort Leavenworth. So I don't know that they're interested in coming back. I know the younger of the two wants to go to Stanford. "Okay, so why do you want to go to Stanford?" "Well, Stanford has a great football program." So that's okay.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Well, thank you so much for this. Welcome back for your 50th reunion, and it's been our pleasure to speak with you today.

Ken Yoshitani:

Well, I hope I can - I had a two cents' worth of whatever that the Center for Oral History is looking for, and I enjoyed my time here and relating to you. And I hope you get to interview other members of class of '65. There are many other members who are very, very, you know, have a more interesting careers than I have, so.

Interviewer:

Yes sir, well, we have a great relationship with your class, and we hope it'll continue.

Ken Yoshitani:

Yeah. Thank you.

Interviewer:

Thank you to the class of '65.