

Interviewer:

All right, today is 20 August -

COL R. Donlon:

Am I straight?

Interviewer:

Sir? Oh, that looks - it looks good.

COL R. Donlon:

Am I straight enough?

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Today is 20 August 2014. Weâ€™re in the studio of the West Point Center for Oral History with Colonel Roger Donlon, Retired. Thank you for being with us today, sir.

COL R. Donlon:

Thank you for the opportunity to be here.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

COL R. Donlon:

Be back home again.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Where did you grow up, sir?

COL R. Donlon:

Saugerties, New York.

Interviewer:

Not terribly far.

COL R. Donlon:

Just due north of here to exit 20, foothills of the Catskills. When people ask me that around the world, I says, â€œWell, I live about eight miles south of Woodstock.â€ â€œOh, we know where that is.â€

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Thatâ€™s a landmark.

COL R. Donlon:

No matter where you are in the world -

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

COL R. Donlon:

You mention Woodstock, people will say it.

Interviewer:

Did they ever ask you if you were at Woodstock, sir?

COL R. Donlon:

Oh yeah.

Interviewer:

And?

COL R. Donlon:

I says, â€œThank God I wasnâ€™t.â€ Yeah.

Interviewer:

Well stated.

COL R. Donlon:

My mother was on the front porch saying a rosary when they were going by, hordes. She wrote me a letter overseas. She says, â€œYou know I raised you to always thank God for everything, and God takes care of everybody.â€ She says, â€œWell, itâ€™s the first time I witnessed thereâ€™s a lot of people he failed to give instruction how to bathe.â€ She says, â€œThey sure smell different.â€ Mother thought it was B.O., and what she was smelling was pot, and she didnâ€™t identify with it. So -

Interviewer:

It was an eye-opener, I'm sure.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. And what did your parents do for a living?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Well, there was ten of us children, so that's part of the answer.

Interviewer:

That's a living, yes sir.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. My father ran the family business, which was a coal and lumber business his father established in Saugerties. My mother raised us.

Interviewer:

And you were number?

COL R. Donlon:

Number eight.

Interviewer:

Number eight.

COL R. Donlon:

I'm the youngest boy. There's four of us left. We just had a little reunion. My brother in Jersey, who was prolific amongst us, he had nine children, so we rendezvous there to make it simple to get many together, so. When his children and grandchildren show up, we got a gang, and then a few of us out-of-towners show up, it's great. Between the four of us, we added our age, now we're 342 years, collective.

Interviewer:

Sounds like a Biblical age. Well, how did you first become interested in serving in the military?

COL R. Donlon:

Well, in our family environment service was a common subject, and it was - it surfaced in many ways, but it surfaced every day at dinner around the table, 'cause in my youth and my upbringing, we said grace before and after meals. Mother was the guardian of that. And then when everybody was there on Sundays and weekends, there was a little more than just grace. That's when we learned our family lineage and heritage, 'cause we were praying for one reason or another for grandparents, aunts and uncles. And always my mother's brother was mentioned, Uncle Eddie, who was gassed in World War 1; had other uncles that served, plus my father served in World War 1.

Interviewer:

What did he do in the Army, sir?

Interviewee:

My father was quartermaster in World War 1.

Interviewer:

Did he go to Europe?

COL R. Donlon:

No, he didn't deploy, but I carry a little trinket in my pocket. It happens to be a Corps of Engineer, World War 1, compass. It doesn't open as readily as it used to.

Interviewer:

Well, it's got some years on it, sir.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Could you hold that up a little please, sir?

Interviewee:

But I carry this - a compass like this was given back to me on the 25th anniversary of our

battle, when Saugerties invited me back, my family, all my children, and my wife, of course, and then some of my teammates were there as well. One of the things during that visit, we went to my old Boy Scout troop, and they presented back to me a compass, along with the Tenderfoot certificate. I carry this with me 'cause it's a tangible reminder that I have to check my compass on a daily basis, and that compass was set, my course in life, by that we just talked about, Mother and Daddy. And Daddy's direction was, 'Don't ever be afraid of hard work. When - not if, but when - you fall, get up and get the job done; the job done at hand, and then get ready for the next job.

And he often reminded - because I was born right after the Depression, and the coal and lumber business was destroyed by fire. So we were in pretty poor straits, but I remember Daddy saying that 'it is no disgrace to be poor.' Then he would add, 'However, it is mighty darn inconvenient at times. That summed it up, and it summed up his attitude towards life. There'll be times when things will be inconvenient, but that doesn't mean you stop. You keep on going. And Mother, when we would say grace, she would include the litany of all our relatives, and Uncle Eddie was always intriguing to me because I never got to meet him, 'cause he passed away as a result of the gas.

Interviewer:

Sort of a legendary figure to you.

COL R. Donlon:

Right; he certainly was, and special, of course, for my mother. And Uncle Clark was also in World War 1. So when other things happened and World War 2 came, and my older brother was of age and they went right out of high school drafted. So I was just eager to 'When's my turn going to come?' Since service was engrained in all of us, and at that time, if you look back and you read our history, every little town had practically every family had somebody in the service, and were proud of it. It comes to mind some of our Medal of Honor recipients, Conscientious Objector, but he says he was raised that way. And he says, 'Now, when World War 2 happened,' he says, 'I thought about it, and it was really my responsibility and my privilege to serve, so I'm going.' And he went, and ended up becoming a Medal of Honor recipient. And that was the attitude of our society at that time. I remember years ago, 50 years ago I didn't look at it that way, but now we can look back and see how the attitudes of our society changes over time.

Interviewer:

Perhaps a certain cohesiveness, coming together in times of crisis like that.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Everybody pulled together. It was truly a world war. Everybody felt the threat, directly and indirectly. Did little things like Victory Gardens; everybody had a Victory Garden to help put food on. Rationing put everybody on the same playing field, level playing field, except those that figure out how to black market, and there's always that element.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

COL R. Donlon:

But that's a challenge; that's life in its realism, so.

Interviewer:

And your brothers served in which services?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, my oldest brother Paul was in the Third Division, Army. His baptism of fire was in a little place called Anzio. I spend summers - May, generally - in this area, so I visit with Paul, and the 24th of May was the anniversary of the breakout of Anzio. One of the most horrendous days. The best way I could describe it, when I went to go see the movie Saving Private Ryan, my brother Paul, he just closed his eyes. That first ten minutes of that film is a repeat of what it was like to break out of Anzio; horrendous.

Interviewer:

And sir, did your family know where he was and what was going on, or did you find out

later?

COL R. Donlon:

As a kid, I remember we used to follow the newspaper and the newsreels. Weâ€™d go to a movie just to catch the newsreels, and sometimes weâ€™d find out. And the newspapers, they used to have little schematics where the Third Division would be moving, and they landed at Anzio. We found out later where he was, but he was there for seven, eight months. Four months I think they were locked on the beaches there before they could break out. But thatâ€™s how we used to track him. We knew what unit heâ€™s with. And then he went from there to southern France, where they trained amphibious training, and then had Operation Dragoon, which was a major operation still. Then he was fortunate till he got up into the middle of France, at a place called Saint Di , where he was wounded. And just this past May was the first time, the 24th when I was with him, that he didnâ€™t receive a phone call from his buddy in Texas, so I think his buddy from his squad is passed on. Paulâ€™s 89 now, and heâ€™s going to outlive us all. Heâ€™s ornery as anything still. He drove down to Jersey and drove back up, my brother, yesterday. He - well, all my brothers have taken on as we age together, we feel the impact of what our parents had, hard work. But our faith has become more and more prevalent in our older, better days. But Paul, his faith has been strong and forefront through his whole life.

When I was going to Vietnam, he says, â€œBy the way, Roger,â€ he says, â€œif you donâ€™t mind,â€ he says, â€œIâ€™ll offer you my miraculous medal I wore throughout Europe.â€ He says, â€œGot me home.â€ I says, â€œThanks, Paul.â€ So I took it, and I wore it, and I lost it in a battle. Came home, apologized to Paul. It was a St. Christopher on one side, and it had a red band, or white, and a blue band around the circle, circumference of it, and Army, Navy, and Air Force - Air Corps at that time. I told him I lost it, and he says, â€œDid you ever notice that there was a dent in there?â€ And I says, â€œYeah, I felt something, it was a little.â€ He says, â€œYeah, hunk of shrapnel hit that,â€ he says, â€œprobably saved my life.â€ And he says, â€œI forgot to tell you - a Purple Heart comes with that.â€ And I says, â€œNice time to tell me now.â€

Interviewer:

Set you up.

COL R. Donlon:

He had theâ€|butâ€|

Interviewer:

And your other brother served as well.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Well, Mike served, he also. He went to the First Division, Big Red One, and served in Berlin as the war ended. He had some interesting stories. He was a jock also, so they were after him to play basketball and baseball. So he was in one of the Honor Guards, Berlin. Heâ€™s proud of his service. And then Jack spent career in the Air Force. My other brother, Gerard, spent a hitch in the Air Force, so we all served. We never did add up the total years of service; probably 70, something like that.

Interviewer:

Well, I think you may have already at least partially answered my next question, which is who were some of the biggest influences that you recall as a soldier and a leader? Clearly, your father, your brothers. Anybody else? Anyone else in your community - teachers, neighbors, anyone else that -

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Well, you hit it on the head. Daddy was the first influence. As a kid, when I was stoking the furnace or starting a fire in the hot water heater, for the hot water heater, I would get his old World War I campaign hat out and march around the basement with a broomstick, be studying my Latin vocabulary. And then when Paulâ€™s uniform showed up, Iâ€™d wear his uniform, and I used to be amazed. Iâ€™d say, â€œI see a C.I.B. on there.â€ He says, â€œI donâ€™t need that one.â€ He certainly didnâ€™t need that Purple

Heart. And I heard about the Good Conduct ribbon. As Boy Scouts that's one of the things we did. We learned how to identify all the ribbons, so when guys were home on leave, we'd look at them.

And we used to see who could tell first whether he was serving in the Pacific or he was serving in the European Theater, and it was a challenge for us. But it was a good way for us - and that stimulated our interest, of course. And then during the war, there was a guy named *BERNIER* - we called him General Bernier - but he thought that we ought to have our own little Army as kids. So he organized the north side of town against the south side of town, and there was probably 20 of us in each. And we'd do our separate training and maneuvers, and then on Saturdays we'd meet in some cornfield or some parking lot and have it out, with rotten apples, or eggs, or slingshots with chestnuts.

We even advanced to the point where we had brooms and lightly dipped in gasoline and lit them and chased each other, so we raised hell and had fun.

Interviewer:

A little early tactics there.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. The best experience I remember that we'd get them on the run and then get them to chasing us, but we dug booby traps on the trail, and then covered it over. Then we'd get them running down - of course, we'd hop over that, and they'd come running down and they'd go. And it was just enough to go in about two or three feet, enough to fall. And then once they fell they were sitting targets, and we'd get them with rotten apples and eggs. So that was part of our initial training, we did that. And then of course, during the war we had blackout raids, held raids, and that had multi-purpose, 'cause it was for national security. But remember I said there were ten of us kids.

Blackout raids was a blessing in disguise for mother, because all the lights went out, the blackout shades went down. She says, "This is a good time to pray for peace." So we'd circle around the dining room table and say the Rosary. Of course, it gave me an opportunity to try night crawling - do my low crawl and get over and grab my sister's leg or skirt or something, so I wasn't always reverent, but stirred things up a little bit. But the message being that Mother never gave up an opportunity to instill in us the importance of prayer and to have a spiritual dimension in our lives, and I'm eternally grateful for that. We've tried to pass that on to our children and our grandchildren, as well as our friends and associates.

Interviewer:

Well, so how old were you - you initially joined the Air Force, is that correct, sir?

COL R. Donlon:

Air Force, yeah. Wanted to join the Navy, but in order to do that I was going to quit high school. My brother Paul came home on convalescent leave, and he sat me on the front porch and says, "You finish high school." And I says, "Nope, I'm going down this afternoon." He says, "Well, come over here and sit by me, then." And we talked and he set me up. He wanted me to get in reach, and he knew I could outrun him because he was still using a cane. But he talked to me in earnest, saying why I should stay in high school, and I was, "Nah, I'm going to the recruiter." As I stood up, then he reached to grab his cane, which then as I go away he grabbed that hook on that cane around my ankle and pulled me down. Sat me down, says, "I think you ought to change your mind," so I finished high school. So enlisted in the Air Force. It was the jet age, you know. Thought I - I was going to do something different; two brothers in the Air Force and two in the Army.

So it was my chance to break the tie.

Interviewer:

And what was it about the Air Force, other than having brothers in the Air Force, was it, like you said, the jet age? Did it seem modern and exciting to go in the Air Force?

COL R. Donlon:

During World War II, I made model airplanes, balsa wood, paper airplanes; that was a big

thing. My brother Mike was the best one at it. We all dabbled in it, but Mike was really good at it, and I'd slip in his room and copy his work, and then sometimes open the window and let his planes fly out. Then he would beat me up for crashing them.

Interviewer:

I'm getting the impression you might've been a handful as a young man.

COL R. Donlon:

I was adventurous; I think so. But I had a lot of guidance. I was the youngest of five boys, so I watched them, and some of them were pretty dull. But they were all athletes. Mike was - Paul played baseball. Mike was baseball, basketball, and Jack was soccer and basketball, and Gerard was baseball. When I came along, my mother says, "No sports for you." She says, "You're going to get hurt. You're skinny."

Interviewer:

She was looking out for you.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. So junior year in high school, or maybe senior year, I forged her name, and we just started football again in Saugerties, six-man football, so I got on the six-man football team. Mother was never able to find the time or the way to get to a football game, but one time she managed to hitch a ride with one of my neighbors, Buzz Burhans. Buzz was the class of '56 here, a classmate in high school. My mother went with Mrs. Burhans and Mr. Burhans up to Margaretville where we were playing football, and about the third play in the game I got cold-cocked. I got knocked out and I'm laying on the ground, and my mother's down there praying. She says, "I knew the good Lord told me you was going to get hurt." I says, "Just keep on praying, Mom; there's more of this game."

So she did. That's off on a tangent, but that's life.

Interviewer:

That's how it works. So what did you do in the Air Force, sir?

COL R. Donlon:

Went to Sampson Air Force Base, and at that time, I heard that there was a place called the U.S. Air Academy that was starting up, and I says, "Well, I'm going to put my application in to go to the Prep School for West Point and the Air Academy as a backup." And while I was at Sampson Air Force Base, they processed all that, and then they lost it, and they said, "Well, we'll send you to the next place and somebody will find it." And I says, "No," I says, "I'll stay until they find it." So they made me a Drill Instructor, so I did that for a while, and then they finally found it and processed it. And that's when I came to Newburgh, New York, Headquarters Eastern Air Defense Command/U.S. Military Academy Prep School, and at that time, all services came. We had Army, Navy, and Air Force guys. Still in contact with some of those guys - it's really great. In fact, 59 years ago we started our Plebe year this time of the year.

Interviewer:

And Prep School, that was a one-year course.

COL R. Donlon:

It was basically, yeah, about ten months. I tried to get in on the class of '58, but I got the tail end, and I couldn't get caught up to speed. So I stayed over to get - came in in '55. So my Air Force time was just a Drill Instructor and Prep School, so it wasn't much. I never got on an airplane. Boy, that was my disappointment. When I enlisted in the Air Force in Albany, New York, I was dressed in December to go to San Antonio, Texas, where my brothers all went to boot camp. I looked out the train - they took the train up to the plane station, airport. I says, "Train." I looked out the window, and I, "Something's wrong, 'cause the Hudson River's on the right. That means we're going north." I says, "The whole world is upside-down." I says, "This is not what I expected."

And as always, you end up your first place in the middle of the night, and we get there and

we get to the barracks, and itâ€™s dark. And next thing everybodyâ€™s in their sack, and next morning you wake up and the lights come flashing on, and I woke up in a cold sweat. Youâ€™d appreciate this, because the walls were full of G.T.A.s, the Government Training Aids. Big profiles of ships. Sampson was unlike Geneva, was a former Navy training base, but the Air Force took it over and they didnâ€™t have enough budget money to change the wallpaper, so I thought I was in the Navy. And then I heard big - Iâ€™ll never forget the voice - Sergeant *COFFEY* come up the stairwell, okay? Something to the effect, â€œDrop your cocks and grab your socks,â€ and -

Interviewer:

Itâ€™s a classic.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. So something like that, and I says, â€œAn Air Force uniform - oh, thank God.â€ But I got my first leadership position. As I mentioned, I was dressed for San Antonio, Texas. Here it was the middle of December, and it was colder than you know and a witchâ€™s what, and man, I was standing there and I was just shivering. I was straight as an arrow. He looked at me, he says, â€œYou got good military bearing.â€ He says, â€œYouâ€™re Guidon this morning.â€ I says, â€œWell, at least Iâ€™ll be able to run, keep warm.â€ So I kept my military bearing and earned a slot as a Drill Instructor. What comes to mind, we had one guy in our Flight, as they call them in the Air Force, he had a propensity to bet on everything. He was from Brooklyn; little Italian guy, his name escapes me.

But heâ€™d bet on this and bet on that, and heâ€™d con people in at a nickel or quarter or dime or dollar, and he was always winning his bets. And then towards the end of the boot camp, he says, â€œBefore this is over, Iâ€™m getting a ride in a Cadillac - Iâ€™m getting a personal ride in a Cadillac.â€ â€œNo way.â€ We were down to the last three or four days, and the kitty was getting bigger and bigger. Next day before graduation, nothing; everything was in the kitty, and somebody was yelling about it, it was great. Middle of the night, we hear this blood-curdling scream - [brm] - he was having his own little E&E program kicked in. He faked appendicitis. He was moaning and groaning, and an ambulance pulls up, and the ambulance is an old Cadillac. Theyâ€™re putting him on a stretcher, and heâ€™s going [holds two thumbs up]. He took the kitty and graduated with it. I says, â€œThatâ€™s part of humor in uniform.â€

Interviewer:

Sometimes all you can do is laugh, right?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. I donâ€™t - that came up years later. My wifeâ€™s a great shopper, and sheâ€™ll be getting catalogs from all over the world, so separating the mail, I threw all the catalogs over there, and she threw one back at me. She says, â€œThat oneâ€™s for you.â€ I says, â€œOh, thatâ€™s Samsonite suitcases,â€ and she says, â€œNo, itâ€™s for you.â€ It turned out to be a newsletter somebody created from Sampson Air Force Base, everybody that went to Sampson. They call it â€œThe Sampsonites,â€ so I got reconnected with some of the people that went through there.

Interviewer:

And so you went from there to Newburgh, is that right?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, to Prep School. They made it in with the class of â€™59. They saw my first lacrosse played, the Charlie Company, First Regiment. Some of my classmates were Mike Gillette, John Grinalds - heâ€™s our only guy in our class that went Marine Corps. Have you interviewed him yet?

Interviewer:

No sir.

COL R. Donlon:

You need to; Major General. After he retired, he became President of the other West Point of the South, the Citadel. In my opinion, even as a Plebe, he was one of the bright leaders of our time. Mike Gillette was All-American; I think he was All-American hockey player.

Mike's dad was a Chemistry Department head, I think. Anyway, but we had a great class. Major *FORTEZ* was my Portuguese instructor. There was a peg-leg math Instructor, Section 22 - Section 22 the old way. You started with Section 1 to 22, and you're according to your academic standing what section you were in.

So you presume you can figure out where I was. I always was looking up. So to make a long story short, calculus got me the last semester Plebe year, and they had a system then, you're out, but you had a chance to take a re-entrance exam. So I borrowed money from my brother Paul, and there was a Doctor Silverman he had. He was actually a boyhood friend of a guy named Einstein, little Jewish guy down in New York City on Clay Avenue. Four or five of us just moved in his attic, and he pumped math in from sunrise to sunset, got us boned up, and we made it back in. They didn't last too long.

My attitude towards discipline had withered considerably during my absence.

Interviewer:

Based upon your stories of your childhood, I'm not sure it was much ever there.

COL R. Donlon:

Well, yeah. My attention span. So I resigned in March, or I guess March or April '57, but I stayed in contact with classmates and served with them. I ended up getting commissioned about two weeks later than my class to O.C.S. 'cause when I re-enlisted in the Army.

Interviewer:

Where did you go after you left West Point?

COL R. Donlon:

I went to the asphalt jungle called New York City. My brother worked there at that time, and let's see, who else? I guess Paul's the only one at that time. I had relatives in New York, so it was a good place to start looking. So I got a suit and I started walking the streets, and I says, "Well," I saw this big building that says "I.B.M." So I says, "I heard a lot of good things." I had two brothers that worked for them, and a sister that did some short-time work with them, so I just walked cold off the street looking for a job. They says they don't hire that way, but I was talking to the Director of Personnel, and he was kind of surprised that anybody got that far into his office. About that time, some gentleman walks by, said, "Good morning," to his Director of Personnel.

And I greeted him too. I says, "Good morning, sir; nice to see you." "And who are you?" I say, "I'm looking for a job." And the two guys looked at each other, and I'm standing there. Turned out to be Tom Watson, Mr. I.B.M., the founder of I.B.M., so I went to work next week. Didn't know a damn thing about computers, was scared of them, but I says, "Be a good place to start." I worked in their library, their data bank building, punch cards in those days and everything. It was a big thing for a little country boy going to a big city, and I was excited.

Interviewer:

Now, when you were at I.B.M., were you planning on working your way back into the military in some way, or just sort of drifting around trying to find something to do?

COL R. Donlon:

I wasn't planning. I was just drifting I think is probably a good way - it's a Naval term. I couldn't find my navel even about that time. I was pretty much mad at the world myself, but then I fell in love with a gal at I.B.M. who was an up-and-comer. We got married, which didn't work out, except the fact we had a child, and that worked out in the long run, but that marriage was very short-lived, and it was 19 years later till I had time to spend time with my daughter. Now we're very close, today with us. I guess that comes under the category when you get knocked down or fall down, you get up and get on with it, as Daddy would say. And that was an experience in my life that I got knocked down or fell down over my own accord, but.

So when I re-enlisted in the Army, I gave myself two years to get to O.C.S. if I could, and then sort it out after that, and that worked out. I had some good experience at O.C.S. My enlisted time was good at Fort Jackson -

Interviewer:

South Carolina.

COL R. Donlon:

Training center.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. What were you doing? What was yourâ€

COL R. Donlon:

Well, I went through training, and then I stayed on as a Evaluator and G3, and that was kind of a hold pattern for O.C.S. also. That was an interesting experience, â€˜cause during that time is as System Instructors and Evaluators for training, the Cadre were primarily Senior N.C.O.s. Many of those N.C.O.s were R.I.F. Officers from Korea; former Captains and Majors, and they made up the test board for G3. That was a real education for me to be associated with those N.C.O.s. They were reverted to their N.C.O. rank because of the R.I.F., and they had to serve out their 20 years, and then they could retire at the highest grade they ever held, as a Captain or a Major.

That was the system at that time. So invariably weâ€™d have some coffee conversations and theyâ€™d be talking about their times in Korea and stuff, and that stimulated our interest, and young guys were going to O.C.S. So when I went to the O.C.S., I requested to go back to Fort Benning. People said, â€œYouâ€™re crazy. Youâ€™re going to a training center.â€ I says, â€œI want to see it from the Commissioned side of the house and get a feel for it,â€ â€˜cause I felt that if we do it right in training centers, everything else would fall into place. If we do it wrong in training centers, weâ€™re going to be fixing train wrecks forever. And that was just my sense then, and itâ€™s my firm belief now. I still believe that way. If we fail to do it right in training centers, weâ€™ve failed ourselves completely. So I had some great experiences there.

Ended up with the, in the Fifth Regiment, which was great for me, â€˜cause they were the Fighting Fifth. And we were the Fighting Fifth, so that spirit of fight; we were pugnacious guys, and somebody said, â€œFight?â€ and we said, â€œOf course. With who?â€ And if theyâ€™re more than armâ€™s length, hope they canâ€™t run faster than we can. So we were ready to fight. And of course, on occasions, after a long weekend, the Regimental Headquarters, a big sign would be out there. The Regimental Commander would be rather upset at Reveille, because there would be a Fifth of this is Jack Daniels, and a Fifth of Seagramâ€™s out there. I says, â€œThis is the Fighting Fifth spirit.â€ But thatâ€™s probably where I met my first truly alcoholic, when I was a Second Lieutenant.

He was my Supply Sergeant, and that guy was a 27-day wonder. Everybody wondered how he did everything perfect for 27 days, and the rest of the month he was totally out of it. But he was really alcoholic, but he managed it and he retired somehow. That was my first introduction to see somebody in that capacity. He was an old-timer, goes back to the Cavalry. And I remember one Saturday morning I drove by the Supply Room, and it was all blacked out and thereâ€™s O.D. blankets over the windows, and I hear commands inside [grumbles command sounds]. Man, I go in there, and there is old Sergeant West. Heâ€™s snokkered, and heâ€™s got the horse, the gymnastic horse, using that, and he was saddling up his mule in his own la-la land.

And heâ€™s trying to do it to perfection. He was harmless, but I found out he did that every payday, and theyâ€™d let the Supply Room be his. But thatâ€™s the same Supply Room, he never got anything less than 100; he knew how toâ€™payday. And that was day with payday, we would pay in cash. My Battalion Commander came to me and says, â€œLieutenant, I want you to tell me how many people youâ€™re going to pay.â€ I says, â€œ212.â€ He says, â€œWhen you draw the money,â€ he says, â€œdraw 212 silver dollars, the rest in paper and whatever, and Iâ€™ll tell you what to do.â€ So we get the old Supply Sergeant out, and we get the pay table set up, and then he put a cot over there, and heâ€™d take a horse blanket and you put that thing over the cot. Weâ€™d pin it underneath real tight; it was just like a snare drum.

As a Pay Officer, theyâ€™d come up and the first dollar they would get would be a silver

dollar. Start counting it off - pop it on that thing and itâ€™d bounce, and they had to catch it, and if they didnâ€™t catch it, it went to the slush fund. So the informal donation, but - who was that? Colonel Manning, yeah. Colonel Manning was the Battalion Commander. He had a little tiny short Major Miller was his Executive Officer. And weâ€™d go to Happy Hour and Major Miller would show up, and heâ€™s always get the new Lieutenants. Heâ€™d say, â€œOh, we got some new Lieutenants. Come on over here, we have to tell you something.â€ And invariably heâ€™d get around, â€œYou know they call me Pony. Youâ€™re not going to ask me why they call me Pony?â€ He says, â€œWell, Iâ€™ll tell you.â€ He says, â€œIâ€™m too small to be a horseâ€™s ass.â€ And heâ€™d point to the big Colonel over there. So more humor in uniform. Oh yeah.

Interviewer:

Well sir, how well did O.C.S. prepare you for your initial assignments as an Officer? Based upon your other experiences, O.C.S. may not have been that significant for you, because you already had other types of experiences.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Well, it was good, very good. In fact, as you implied there, it was a compilation of experiences. Home training, my experience in Boy Scouting was very valuable, and then my experience in the Air Force, and then Prep School, and here at the Academy, then going to O.C.S. So I tell people Iâ€™ve been a Private three times. They look at it and they immediately say, â€œHeâ€™s such a rascal he was probably court-martialed three times.â€ I never explained it, how I became a Private three times; I let people figure it out. But I only got offered an Article 15 once, really, and that was turned down, fortunately. But the O.C.S. experience was superb.

It was tough. Everybody was striving to be the best and to be the Honor Graduate. I was aced out on that by my buddies.

Interviewer:

You finished O.C.S. inâ€

COL R. Donlon:

â€™59.

Interviewer:

â€™59.

COL R. Donlon:

July â€™59, 24 of June â€™59, yeah, a couple weeks behind the class.

Interviewer:

Now, how aware were you at that time of what was going on in Vietnam?

COL R. Donlon:

In â€™59, there wasnâ€™t much; things were just perking. They had other things going on. I just wanted to get out of O.C.S. and get to Airborne training and get to an Airborne unit, and then get into Special Forces. Special Forces was introduced to me by one of my O.C.S. buddies. I would be talking about my brothers Paul and Mike and their experience, and Don Lundy would be talking about his brother Bob, who was with the 10th Special Forces and the original 77th. So that piqued my interest, I guess. And then I thought I was going to be able to go as Special Forces when I got commissioned, but you had to be a Captain, so they says, â€œGet in line.â€ [Growls] So what do you do for that? So I went to Fort Jackson, as I mentioned.

That was in â€™59. Then came back to Benning for some more schooling, Commo schooling, then off to Alaska until â€™61. Turned out to be the best assignment I ever had, â€™61, 2, and 3. Had great experience up there, first in the Ninth Infantry, the Manchus, and they had a very appropriate motto: Keep up the fire. And if youâ€™re in the Arctic and somebody says, â€œKeep up the fire,â€ man, the first thing you think is keeping warm.

Interviewer:

Literally.

COL R. Donlon:

Literally or figuratively.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL R. Donlon:

So that was an awesome experience. Thereâ€™s a - the trophy for the First of the Ninth Infantry is called a Lipscomb Bowl. And itâ€™s a bowl at least this big, holds probably ten gallons of libations. Itâ€™s solid silver. Indochina and China, the Regiment found the silver in a mine, and they all got together and said, â€œHey, what are we going to do with it? Weâ€™re rich. The warâ€™s going to be over; weâ€™re going home.â€ And some Lieutenant or Captain, I forget - I think it was Lipscomb - he says, â€œNo, weâ€™re going to have to turn this in.â€ So they turned it in, and then they were able to convince them that we ought to keep it for the Regiment. And they melted it down. And it is awesome, carved beautiful with dragons and everything.

And then there was a cup, a silver cup, and everybody that served, every Officer in the Regiment who served there is engraved on that throughout history. And thatâ€™s the focal point of unit events and unit pride. Itâ€™s a 24/7 guard; itâ€™s probably worth a million dollars, this artwork and the value of the silver. But we had that with us in Alaska, and that was great. We had â€˜62 was true Arctic; we had a cold snap where it ranged between 55 below and 72 below for two weeks, and that was awesome. It was great. I was fortunate, got myself - we were out on maneuver one time. Colonel Frank Norton was our Battle Group Commander - had battle groups at that time - came by my Platoon area and says, â€œLieutenant Donlon.â€

Well, I come out of the tent and he asked, â€œI hear you want to go to Ski Instructor course.â€ Of course, the Colonel saying something to the Lieutenant was the only thing you say is, â€œYes sir.â€ So I said, â€œYes sir,â€ so off I went up to Ski Instructor, Cold Weather Mountain Operations Course. Nine-week course. The bonus, we even got \$15.00 a day T.D.Y. It was, man, that was big stuff, so. Sergeant Morales was our ski instructor. Iâ€™ll never forget him. Again, in the chain of N.C.O.s Iâ€™ve been blessed to be associated with. Sergeant Furman was my Platoon Sergeant in the First and the Ninth. Sergeant Morales, when heâ€™d wear us down - heâ€™d try to teach us to ski and everything all day. Back in the quonset hut, â€œOkay, take your mind off skis. Come on over here,â€ and weâ€™d get around a potbellied stove. Heâ€™d throw a footlocker out, open up a chessboard. He taught us all how to play chess.

At the time, only 1 of us out of the 12 of us could play. At the end of nine weeks, we all - we chipped in for a chess set at the P.X., and said, â€œWhoever wins the last game gets the chess set.â€ I still remember how I won that.

Interviewer:

A trophy.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. While we were waiting on the bus, we were outside and it was colder than a witchâ€™s tit, and we had the chess board set up on the duffle bag and we were playing. And the wind blew and blew one of my pieces over, and I was going checkmate, so I donâ€™t even know how I won. Somebody called, â€œCheckmate.â€ It was just a fluke. So I came home with the chessboard, but those are all little experiences which the lesson from Sergeant Morales was that you worked hard and you trained hard. But you had to work on your mental alertness and toughness as well as your physical, and Iâ€™ll always remember him for that lesson. I never became a very good chess player, but I had a lot of fun telling the story about how I won the chessboard.

Interviewer:

Well, all this Arctic training, itâ€™s not that much later you were in a very different environment. Could you -

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, well, I ended up going to Bragg, and I ended up in Vietnam, so they, â€œWho the hell did you piss off when you were in the Arctic you end up in the tropics?â€ And I says,

â€œWell, I didnâ€™t piss off anybody; I asked for it.â€ And they said, â€œBoy, youâ€™re going to get a Section 8 if you donâ€™t watch it.â€

Interviewer:

But you joined Special Forces in â€™63, is that correct?

COL R. Donlon:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Okay, and now by this time, sort of popular awareness of Vietnam has grown significantly.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. My first really awareness, I think it was Life Magazine. I think it was Captain Bacon, if I remember right. It showed him wearing a maroon beret in a rice paddy in a place called Vietnam. I read that article, and I said, â€œWell, it looks like things are getting hot.

Weâ€™d better get over there.â€ Yeah. And when I was in Alaska with the First of the Ninth, I got dubbed and selected to be the Aide-de-camp, which I tried to talk myself out of. I did everything possible. I says, â€œGeneral,â€ I says, â€œyou donâ€™t want me.â€ I says, â€œIâ€™m not a very good scholar.â€ I says, â€œIâ€™m not always disciplined. In fact, I didnâ€™t even finish your school, your Alma Mater.â€ He says, â€œCan you spell?â€ I said, â€œA few words.â€ I was trying to talk myself out of the job.

And he says, â€œWell, your job description, Iâ€™ll give it to you quickly,â€ he says. â€œHereâ€™s the 3 x 5 card. Spell assume in big letters.â€ And A-S-S-U-M-E. He says, â€œYou did good - spelled it perfectly.â€ He says, â€œNothing wrong with your spelling at all.â€ And he was like this, he was, â€œNow pronounce it,â€ and he says, â€œAss-u-me.â€ He says, â€œThatâ€™s your job description. Make sure whatever you do, make sure it never happens to me. You donâ€™t make a ass of me or let anybody else make a ass of me.â€ He says, â€œYou have any other further questions?â€ I said, â€œOh shit.â€ He says, â€œYou can take my chopper and go back and finish Ski Instructor School.â€ And then during the interview, he says, â€œWell, you take this,â€ he says, â€œI think weâ€™ll work together well.â€ He says, â€œIâ€™ll help you with your next assignment.â€ So fast forward, and come he got his assignment, so I says, â€œIâ€™d better speak up.â€

I says, â€œI want to go Special Forces.â€ â€œNo way in hell.â€ He says, â€œI donâ€™t believe in anything special.â€ He says, â€œThatâ€™s robbing Peter to pay Paul,â€ he says, â€œputting all the good guys and strong N.C.O.s in one outfit, the rest of the Army will suffer. No way - over my dead body.â€ And I says, â€œThatâ€™s not the way I understood it, General.â€ I says, â€œYour wordâ€™s your bond.â€ He frowned a little bit, and he says, â€œWell, I told you Iâ€™d help you.â€ He says, â€œIâ€™ll sleep on it.â€ So the next day he came in, he says, â€œCall General Yarborough.â€ Thereâ€™s a couple other things happened in between. As an Aide I had the opportunity to help coordinate hunting and fishing trips for V.I.P.s from the Lower 48. The General always had reason why he couldnâ€™t go on these, rarely did, and I got him going fishing a couple times.

But getting to know him, he always said, â€œAh, if I ever had a chance, Iâ€™d really like to go home with a black bear trophy,â€ but it wasnâ€™t in the planning, so I did my homework and found out when black bears are coming out of hibernation. Went and told the Generalâ€™s wife that the Generalâ€™s going to be sick the 15th, 16th, and 17th of March. â€œRoger, what are you up to?â€ And I told her. She says, â€œThatâ€™s really kind of you to think of that, so Iâ€™ll make all the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches you want.â€ Then I went and told the General, and he says, â€œOh, thatâ€™s great,â€ he says, â€œthatâ€™s good.â€ And about that time, the Chief of Staff walks in; Herb Hicks, great big guy from Cowpens, Carolina. â€œWhatâ€™s going on here?â€ He says, â€œGeneral, you canâ€™t be gone those days â€™cause the Governorâ€™s coming.â€ And Iâ€™m sitting there sweating bullets; I said, â€œOh God.â€

And the General looks up at Colonel Hicks and says, â€œHerb, what do you think I have all you Colonels for? Just â€™cause the Governorâ€™s coming doesnâ€™t mean I have to

be here.â€ And I [lets out a sigh]. And the door closed, and the Colonel Chief of Staff looks at me and gives me his finger, and gave me a little counsel. He says, â€œThe next time, come through me.â€ I said, â€œWell, I cleared it to his wife.â€ He says, â€œThat ainâ€™t the way the chain of command is supposed to work.â€ I says, â€œOn some things it does work that way.â€ He says, â€œYeah, but youâ€™re getting too smart for your pants, Donlon.â€

Interviewer:

Did he get a bear?

COL R. Donlon:

Yep, he did. That was an experience. It was great. I chased it out of hibernation. I was in the line of fire for a second or two; got out of that, and then he dropped it. As he and Jim *MESSER* were coming up the mountain, Iâ€™m sitting on it keeping warm, and it dawns on me, â€œWhoâ€™s going to skin this bear?â€ The biggest thing I ever skinned was a squirrel or a rabbit, so I got my lesson on how to skin a bear. And then it got interesting after that. Then the rules of the engagement are that for big game, you had to take at least a quarter off with the hide, and you store the rest and come back and get it. So we did that, so we put a hindquarter in one of the backpacks and gave it to Jim. And then they got the hide, and they put that thing up.

And I got that thing up there and I says, â€œWell, put the skin against my back and Iâ€™ll carry it that way.â€ And they says, â€œWell, God, what do you look like?â€ and he says, â€œYou look like about a seven-foot hamburger.â€ I said, â€œWell, give me a couple legs.â€ And he turned it up and he says, â€œNow you look like a hamburger with hair,â€ and I says, â€œWell, weâ€™ll try that version,â€ and we went down, down the mountain. It was the next day that General Wheeler called Fort Bragg to talk to General Yarborough. â€œWell, the guy, your young Lieutenant is going to be a Captain next week. I gave him his P.T. test. He skinned a bear and carried it off a mountain, so heâ€™s ready for you guys. You do the rest.â€ So little did I ever expect when they called me to be at the White House. They said, â€œWho do you want to be there?â€ I said, â€œOf course, my family and my team, and then General and Mrs. Wheeler.â€

So they were there. I remember my aunt, my motherâ€™s sister, who was a nun. Thatâ€™s another interesting story. When I was home on leave and I got the call to be at the White House for the ceremony, I called my aunt and I said, â€œAunt Ruth, you want to go to the White House?â€ and I was always kidding her as a kid, and sheâ€™s, â€œWhat are you up to now, Roger?â€ â€œNo, no, Iâ€™m going to invite you.â€ She says, â€œYou know I canâ€™t go. We have to travel in pairs, the nuns.â€ And I says, â€œItâ€™s all right.â€ I said, â€œIâ€™ll have them invite your Mother General.â€ â€œYeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.â€ So I had them do that, so they came. And she got stuck with writing a after-action report and a trip report for the White House from the Sisters of Mercy. But that was good.

Interviewer:

Now, did you feel the training that you and your men received with Special Forces adequately prepared you for your duties?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, we were - we thought we were hot shit - yeah. While I was in Alaska - well, actually I have to back up a little bit - the training. When I went to the training at Bragg, right at the end I was pulled out to go back to Alaska â€˜cause they were reorganizing the Eskimo scouts, and my Commander knew that I just came out of Alaska, and as being an Aide I knew how to get through everything from the Governor on down. So he just pulled me and he says, â€œYouâ€™re going up as my Adjutant, and I says, â€œOh God - thatâ€™s the last thing I want to be.â€ And then he says, â€œWell, you can come up there, and weâ€™re going to be up there three to four months, and get back,â€ he says, â€œyou get your team. In fact, you can look at all the teams while weâ€™re in Alaska and start hand-picking who you want.â€ And I says, â€œOh man, what a golden opportunity thatâ€™d be.â€ So I watched these guys.

Part of my education, a hard part of my education, I had to court-martial in â€˜88 and â€˜89

when I was there. He got a little drunk, and shooting up Nome, Alaska, and Fort Richardson. But that was part of my training also. But - and I thought I was going to - I pinpointed some of the finest N.C.O.s I ever saw in my life, and I had my list made. And we got to the point where we were going to select our teams. I was getting first choice to pick a Lieutenant as an Exec, and it was a former enlisted guy thatâ€™d already been to Vietnam, and I said, â€œThatâ€™d be a good guy to have.â€ So I grabbed him, and then they says, â€œOkay, well, go down a - instead of letting Donlon pick the rest of the team he wants, weâ€™re just going to alternate from now.â€ So the ten guys putting teams together were all there, and so I never got a single one that I had on my lists.

So I says, â€œWhat the heck - hand of Godâ€™s working here again.â€ But it worked out. And then talk about training, one of the earliest things we did a shakedown as a team, then once we get to know each other briefly, and then we jump into Uwharrie National Park Forest in Carolina, and then a 100-mile march back, checking Commo and all that. But it was really a shakedown, get to know them, and thatâ€™s - we had a lot of fun. And we just had our 50th reunion last month and we had a lot of fun joking about that first 100-mile trip we made with each other; the blisters and chalk. We had chalk where weâ€™d - we turned it into a game at one point. We had no intentions of turning it into a race to get back to Fort Bragg.

As some point we found out that we were ahead of some other teams, so weâ€™d get chalk and put it on the highway someplace, â€œA-726 was here,â€ like â€œKilroy was here,â€ you know? And we left our tag, and we ended up making it back first, so it stirred up a little team esprit and pride in the training. And as youâ€™re probably aware, a Special Forces training we got a variety of experience when you put a team together. And my team, my Team Sergeant was a World War II and Korea veteran, 45 years old. My Intel Sergeant was a Korean War veteran. My Heavy Weapons Sergeant was a Korea and Vietnam veteran, so. And my Light Weapons N.C.O. was a former Navy. My Demo Sergeant was former Marine Corps, and I was former Air Force, so we already had our Joint Operations going, who had experience.

And we had young guys 20 years old with no experience; Army brat, and then John Houston was a high school athlete and he had a competitive spirit. Had a Native American, Jerry Turrin, as a Junior Medic who was a fighting spirit, really tough guy, so we had a great composite team. And then the older guys with the experience, they became, just inherently became those in charge of the cross-training. The Weapons guy would be cross-training Commo; Commo would be cross-training with the Medics; so we had all that going. So that whole concept you get introduced to, and during your pre-deployment training, the first phases of that takes part, takes place.

And when you see that taking place, and you see your Commo Sergeant saying, â€œHey, let me go help the Medic today do something if somebody gets hurt.â€ Then you see him automatically, somebody gets injured, small injury or seriously injured, theyâ€™re helping each other and doing each otherâ€™s work. And the Commo, everybody has to be able to handle that, including crank the roll generator, which everybody detested, but it was it leveled the playing field, cranking it and keep toting it. So it goes back to training, as youâ€™re implying by some of your line of questions, and itâ€™s my belief thereâ€™s nothing more important than training. As I got older and got into the training and education arena - and thereâ€™s a fine line, very definable line between training and education. And I was of the - as a younger man, I was of this mind that I felt training was the most important, and for me, it was. I wasnâ€™t ready for the formal education. I was too undisciplined. My wife will say I still am, but she knows me better than anybody. But there are men and women that education is - theyâ€™re more capable and ready for education earlier. And thatâ€™s why when I mentor young men and women today, I tell them, â€œIf you have the God-given gifts of a good brain, high intelligence, go as far as you can as soon as you can. Donâ€™t be satisfied with high school or bachelorâ€™s degree. Go for a masterâ€™s. Put your target on a doctorate or a specialist in something, an area.â€

Because in the future, training will always be important, but as we get challenged as a nation and as a member of the family of nations, we're going to have to have a high degree of intelligence. We can't be just brawn; we have to have the brains.

Interviewer:

Sir, it's an important distinction, and just so our viewers understand, can you briefly sketch the difference between training and education?

COL R. Donlon:

Mm-hmm. The training are skills, and generally physical skills; education is the ability to deduce and reason, and a willingness to study, and education - training, you can't learn much in training about history, other than looking at how people trained before you. But that's studying history, and that's essential, and that's worth studying history and charting warfare. One of my favorite books on my bookshelf is "Warfare," and it starts with a caveman throwing a rock. And then it shows pictures of the range. Now we're intercontinental. But the same goes with the mind we got. Now we got technology. Man, my smart phone in my pocket is smarter than I'll ever be.

It's a real lot faster.

Interviewer:

Well, so in May of '64, your team - which was A-726, wasn't it?

COL R. Donlon:

That's correct, A-726.

Interviewer:

Assigned to an outpost at Nam Dong?

COL R. Donlon:

Nam Dong, Thua Thien Province, I Corps.

Interviewer:

And that's near the Laotian border, right?

COL R. Donlon:

Yes, we're near the D.M.Z. We're the second Province south of the D.M.Z., and about 15 clicks from the Laotian border.

Interviewer:

And what were your duties there, sir?

COL R. Donlon:

We were - our camp - I was - Nam Dong, that was previously known as Ta Rau. We were the fourth Special Forces team in on that site, rotating on six-month cycles, and we were as Advisors - advise, train, and equip whoever we were working with. And in our case, we're working with irregulars, the Civilian Irregular Defense Group, the C.I.D.G., which were locals, and the leadership in that were A.R.V.N. So it was a combination of working with A.R.V.N. and the Montagnard people. And the Strategic Hamlet Program was a popular program in the early part of Vietnam. Where the central government felt that if they relocated people and leadership under central government tutelage, they would have more control of the population.

But when they relocated the leadership, they put lowland Vietnamese in the highlands, the clash of cultures, the Montagnard people and the lowlands in the highlands, that was the first dilemma. Then to throw leadership upon leadership, the leadership of the Vietnamese counterbalanced against the leadership of the natural tribal people, it was just a formula for disaster.

Interviewer:

It seems to indicate a sort of a lack of understanding of how complex the situation was.

COL R. Donlon:

Well -

Interviewer:

And how ancient some of these -

COL R. Donlon:

That raises a very important question. In our training - going back to training, how were we

prepared - we were prepared with weapons, communication, and medical training, and all of that. But area study program, readings and study, language - half of us studied French, half of us studied Vietnamese, 'cause French was still quite prevalent in the early '60s. The French had spent only 100 years there. There's a story - I'll get back to that. It speaks to the 100 years that the French had. But what I'm leading up to is that one of the books that was our bible in preparing to go to Vietnam was entitled The Vietnam Village, or The Village of Vietnam, by Dr. Gerald Cannon Hickey, anthropologist, who started his graduate study in the late '50s in Vietnam, with the Montagnard people. About a week before we got hit, chopper lands, the dust clears, and who appears on our camp: Dr. Gerry Hickey. 'I come back to do follow-up study on the Katu Montagnards.' He says, 'I never got a chance to get into their minds, what makes them tick, and why we have been unsuccessful on getting full cooperation from this tribe as compared to the Rhade tribe or other tribes.' So that was his goal, to come back and try to study further what he'd studied in previous trips, so. And he was of the mind that there was a solution other than knuckles and fighting it out; that he thought by better understanding the Montagnards, and getting more cooperation from the highland and lowland people. But as an anthropologist, he was not sought after, and when he voiced his opinion, it was not always welcomed. He was given an opportunity, but it was not given front seat, but it didn't discourage him. He kept coming. He didn't come home until '73, '59 to '73, and he's written some awful inspiring and intelligent books I recommend to anybody. Not just The Vietnam Village. Shattered Nations, Window on the World, looking at the Vietnam era through the lenses of an anthropologist is really an insight. And the lesson here is that when military leaders or political leaders or leaders in industry, you know, if they get tunnel vision and think they're going to solve problems by only looking at it through their own lenses, rather than inviting people with another set of lenses looking at the same problem but through their lenses. In this case, minorities. Dr. Hickey's life's work, it was his vocation in life was to study these people, and to share what they have, where they came from, and where they have potential to go. But - and there's a good ending. We'll get to that later.

Interviewer:

That's an interdisciplinary approach, basically practically applying education in a circumstance like that.

COL R. Donlon:

Exactly, yeah. An interdisciplinary approach leads to what the modern label as inter agency cooperation - we get that. And it boils back to one thing: what you can get done as a team. If you get superstars and lone stars, then you're going to have great entertainment, 'cause you're going to have real stories and real history written by teams. But!

Interviewer:

So what was your perception of the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese when you got there and started working with them?

COL R. Donlon:

Well, my first introduction to Vietnamese was on a telephone pole at Fort Benning, Georgia. We were going through an Infantry Officer Commo Course, learning about all the radios in the Infantry inventory at that time, and also learning how to climb poles and hang wire and everything else. And the first time I saw a Vietnamese, he was climbing up, and he got up there at the top of the pole, and I looked over at him, and he went, 'Ahh,' and he slid down that pole. And then he laid down at the bottom, with creosote slivers all up his leg and his groin and his chest. That was the first Vietnamese I ever saw - and aww. And he got up, and - not for me. I started to think that was his last day, last time he ever climbed a telephone pole. But I met my first Vietnamese there, in training at Fort Benning. Some of them were - it was startling at first. The ones that we met were not highly educated and experienced, but once you met the educated people and experienced people, they were pretty neat people. But then we went out into the boonies, and then there

were the Special Forces in the Vietnamese Army. There was a nucleus of very professional, but it turned out to be a magnet for political appointees and people who were being assigned to the unit who really weren't fully qualified. They were qualified in some degree. So that was a challenge to accept that; you had to recognize it first.

Interviewer:

The cronyism in the South Vietnamese regime.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, cronyism, that was it, yeah. Not taking away from the ones that were really professional, truly professional, and committed, and dedicated. And I met many of those. We had, like I mentioned, training missions where we trained irregulars. When we received our roughly complement of 300 trainees, we were informed there was probably about 19 sympathizers amongst those people of questionable loyalty, commonly referred to as sleepers. Go back to the Trojan Horse, or wherever, how far you want to go back in history. Again, we need to study history; not much new, it just comes in a different form. Be ready for it, though; that's the point.

And so I tried to, I requested that we get rid of those 19 and do without them. But because we were in the throes of having another operational mission put on us by I.E. to open up a new camp closer to the Laotian border, they told us to "keep all your warm bodies there, use them accordingly." So of course we never put them near crew-served weapons, and turning it up we had to almost babysit those guys and keep one eye on them. In retrospect, I would've just not asked permission to give them to Headquarters. I would've put them on a chopper, or better yet, probably put them on a deuce and a half and sent them through hell's land, no man's land, and maybe they never would've got back.

Interviewer:

So I mean it was - the identities of the sleepers was apparently pretty known.

COL R. Donlon:

Oh, we'd known that. It's known from the get go. It's always the case. And if you deny the fact that you got that, you're denying yourself proper awareness of your surroundings. But it was 20 years later when I made one of my visits back to Vietnam that I was able to validate how many sleepers there were. We can get to that later.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. So how long had you - I guess you'd been there probably, what, just a few months, when -

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. It was six weeks before we got hit.

Interviewer:

When the -

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. It was a short time.

Interviewer:

6 July 1964.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Yeah. We were just getting settled in. Or we really weren't getting settled in. We thought we were going to get settled in when we had orders to start packing up to go to another place. And that was a little disconcerting to me, because they wanted us to just cut everything in half and take half to the new location. And it sounds good on paper, but when you got stuff that's going on in the area, you got security problems, what are you doing? You going to the new place ill-prepared, or are you leaving the old place ill-prepared as well? So I requested a little time out so I could at least recruit 20 more mercenaries, which was our personal security, which I could've beefed up my security element going into the new camp, and beefed up the stay-behind element. So they gave me the green light to go ahead and recruit 20.

So I got my Chief Nung, Lei Tse-Tung, and this was - the one thing we'd do, and this is a good example of doing things where information turns out to be very compartmentalized

and insulated because we did it spontaneously. Once I got the okay that I could recruit 20, and I just got the next chopper. Took my chief mercenary, took 3 of my men with me, and our goal was to get 20 mercenaries, arm them, equip them, hijack a deuce and a half, make it back through no man's land, where no truck - we'd never been on the ground that way - and come back in. And we came through unscathed, miraculously. It was the stupidest thing I ever did in my whole life, 'cause it was ambush alley every 50 yards or less.

And if they wanted to, they could've just eliminated us, and it would've taken a big chunk out of us leadership-wise and otherwise. But they were in the throes of getting ready to pounce on us. My take on that is they didn't want to show their hand, so they let that one deuce and a half full of rowdy guys - looked like Cox's Army. Everybody had a M-79 grenade launcher, an M-2 carbine, V.A.R.s, God knows what else we toted with us. So we made it back, and we had a beefed up security.

Interviewer:

Well, can you briefly describe these - you refer to them as your security guys.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, well, the Nungs -

Interviewer:

The Nungs.

COL R. Donlon:

The Nungs were ethnic Chinese who, as I like to say, they stayed one step ahead of Communism. Came out of mainland China at the end of World War II, ended up in North Vietnam. Stayed there, and Ho Chi Minh took over up there, and they came south. And somewhere in between World War II end and the Ho Chi Minh, the C.I.A. got involved, and they became security and very loyal. And the Agency no longer required them, and they told MacNamara, "Here, you can have them." MacNamara says, "Good timing. Special Forces could use those." So they became generally our security, and everybody says, "Hey, if you got your Nungs with you, your back, your 6 is covered 24/7 in security." So there was a level of confidence and competence there.

But that created a challenge. When I brought those 20 in, new ones in, one of them looked by, went by one of the old thatched huts, which was a beer hall. We called it a beer hall. It was just a that hut somebody had cold beer. Looked there and he waved at the girl. And then one of the local A.R.V.N. saw him and says, "No, no, he shouldn't be waving at that gal, 'cause that's my girl." Well, they ended up with a little jealousy going on. They had some words, and then they started a shoot-out, so. And my take is that the guy who was a friend of the girl in the bar was one of the sympathizers, instigators, and his job was to stir things up and get things unsettled, and he did.

But I think to our advantage, because with the shoot-out, it raised our level of alertness and concern. One of the things that I still sometimes debate about was I made a decision not to use my Nungs on the outer perimeter security that night. Because the animosity, the outward animosity between the Nungs and the C.I.D.G. and the A.R.V.N., that would've just put them out there sitting targets. So until we got full handle on things, I said, "Well, we're going to keep all our Nungs in the inner perimeter." So we had 60, which was a formidable force, when you figure. But even in spite of that, the infiltrating forces, they penetrated outer perimeter, inner perimeter, and did some damage. But I didn't lose any of my - unnecessarily - my Nungs out of there.

They would've been picked off and slaughtered. In retrospect, it was a good decision. But then the other question in my mind, had they been out there and been effective and alerted us, we might've had a little bit more time. Probably not much more, but some. But they - because they were able to get in, and the sappers slit the throats of the dogs that were on the guard posts, and also some of the people.

Interviewer:

So there was some sort of adversarial relationship between the Nungs and was it just the

North Vietnamese, or was there mistrust of them among the South Vietnamese as well?

COL R. Donlon:

No, the South Vietnamese, yeah.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL R. Donlon:

And the Montagnard, yeah, so.

Interviewer:

Why did they mistrust them?

COL R. Donlon:

Well, you got the cultural difference. You got -

Interviewer:

Just cultural differences?

COL R. Donlon:

The Montagnards, and you got the Vietnamese. There was the us and them. They might be in the highland, but they were looked down upon by the Vietnamese educated cultural people. That was, when all said and done, that could well be one of the sensitive parts and the AchillesTM heel. And the reason I say that, ^âcause having gone back to Vietnam several times, in my most recent visit, where ITMve been involved in many things over there. But most significant thing that happened in my last visit in 2011, when I was asked if I wanted to go back and see Ho Chi MinhTMs mausoleum and stuff like that, I said, ^âœNah, once is enough for me. Show me something new.^â So they said, ^âœWell, you might be interested in our Museum of Ethnicity.^â

And I did just as you did - raised an eyebrow. And I says, ^âœITMm interested.^â So off we go. ThereTMs a Museum of Ethnicity, wherein all 54 ethnic tribes of the Montagnards are showcased by the central government of Vietnam, which today, as we speak, is still a Communist nation. But theyTMve recognized and admitted to themselves and to the world that ^âœif weTMre going to proceed as a nation, we canTMt have the us and them syndrome anymore. We have to incorporate them somehow.^â And so they have a Museum of Ethnicity in Hanoi. They have one in Seoul. And the other thing significant, in our day, highways went north and south.

Today, you see highways going east and west as well; going from the lowland into the hinterland, significant highways. So you see more unity there.

Interviewer:

Sort of integration, really.

COL R. Donlon:

Integration. We talked about education briefly. Several years ago - well, when I made my first trip back to Vietnam in ^â93, I kind of vowed to myself that somehow, some way, somewhere, weTMd do something to honor the people that made the ultimate sacrifice there at that Battle of Nam Dong. Well, I was approached I donTMt know how many years ago by an old Army Special Forces Sergeant Major. Spent most of his time in the Reserve, but some Active. He was interested in building childrenTMs libraries and learning centers in the hinterlands, in Montagnard countries - Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, maybe even China. HeTMs done several. He came, they were working their way up.

Somebody mentioned a place called Nam Dong, and he was asked if he knew anything about that area, and he smiled a little bit. He said, ^âœI know about the area. I know about the battle. I know that guy named Donlon. LetTMs approach him and see if heTMd be interested, and give us an assessment whether such a library and learning center might be feasible.^â So that one thing led to another. We got the green light. I told him, ^âœYes, this would be a great way to honor the people that made the ultimate sacrifice.^â To give you, thereTMs a great story behind that whole thing. In ^â11, I went back for the dedication of that library, and it took a few years to build, and to raise money for that. But when Sergeant Major Worley went back to visit the local officials in the hamlets and villages - this was after my second visit in ^â95, so it was probably closer to 2000 -

He was greeted by, "We know what you're doing. We wondered when you were going to come here, and here's \$10,000.00 seed money for this library here. That's how serious and how much we want it." So the local people knew about the program, got on board, so that's very successful. So now the kicker. That one at Nam Dong has been built and dedicated as a boarding school for the children of Montagnard tribesmen, who are the political, social, educational leaders in the valley today. So the world turns. Now, little did I ever think that having the horrendous Battle of Nam Dong that I'd be going back, helping to rebuild the bridges of understanding between nations through educational endeavors. They physical building of a learning center and library, which also serves as a community center, multipurpose. But it's a magnet, and people are involved. And one of - I mentioned that we were the fourth team. When I went back for the dedication, there was a Commo Sergeant from the very first team who found out that I was going back. And he said, "I always wanted to go back, and since Donlon's going back, it must be safe, so I'm going to go, too." So he shows up. He's there, and we're dedicating a library. He pulls out his checkbook and writes a \$1,000.00 check, donates it for the sustainment program of the library. Yeah.

And sitting next to him was a significant national figure, resident of Hanoi who's related to our, through marriage, to our group. He reached in and personally contributed. So here we have across the seas, people contributing, in the mountains, in the hinterland, something. And anybody who's studied or knows anything about Montagnards, these young boys and girls, many of them for the first time, are being introduced to literature with another language. Literature that can be accessed not just in written words, but computers now. We're putting computers in there, so the window of the world, as Dr. Hickey would call it, anthropologist, is wide open, so.

Interviewer:

Well, some, you know, positives coming out of a very difficult and haunting situation.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Exactly. Well put.

Interviewer:

Great. Well, did you receive any intelligence indicating that the 6 July '64 attack was imminent?

COL R. Donlon:

We certainly didn't get anything from higher Headquarters, but from our own patrols - and Dr. Hickey went out on with them -

Interviewer:

Really.

COL R. Donlon:

With some of my men; Mike Disser, and Tom Gregg, and Terry Terrin, I think Brownie also. They came back a day or so before - day before, I guess - and says, "Really quiet. People are real quiet." And we also got word a couple of hamlet chiefs were assassinated, and when stuff like that happens, we know something's brewing. But nobody anticipated anything the size it turned out to be, 'cause it's been unheard of. There's no major - there was a couple of road incidents where three-quarters were blown up. We call them I.D.U.s now. But no other than the normal sniper fire on camp, harassment and interdiction fires, but no major movements. But it shouldn't be surprising, because they probably got wind that we were going to open up a new camp closer to the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

That would've increased our capability to interdict them as they came in. If you looked at the maps of the traditional Ho Chi Minh Trails, it's depicted. The very first offshoot from the Trail going through Laos into South Vietnam is in our valley, the A Shau Valley and then Nam Dong. And if we moved where we were projected to move, we would've been a bigger thorn in their side. So I figure they got intel on what we were planning and said, "Hey, before they do that, let's go down there and tear the guts out of them."

And by the way, they hit another camp the same the night before or two nights before they hit us. We didn't even know about that. That's how poor our intelligence was. And it was again on that trip I went back to Vietnam where I met who was the Political Officer in '64 who helped plan the attack against us.

I met with him when we went back to the camp. He's the one that confirmed there were more than 19 sympathizers. He says, "More like 100," who turned against us, so that the battle turned against us significantly immediately. So we had all that to contend with. So I lost my train.

Interviewer:

Well, talking about them knowing that you, that the U.S. was going to be setting up another camp, and so that could threaten their freedom of movement. So now -

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

It's chess.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer:

I mean it's moving to block and to exploit, and same thing.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Well, it was I needed a Sergeant Morales there. I should've had -

Interviewer:

That's right. But he was with you - the training.

COL R. Donlon:

He was with me in the recess, yeah.

Interviewer:

Yes sir. Yes sir.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

All right, so the attack begins what, 0230? I mean middle of the night.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, about that time. Yeah. We all pulled our own guard duty. Everybody who was there took their turns. It was my turn, and I was coming off guard duty. In fact, I think I even started to unlace one boot, maybe both of them, 'cause I was going to check the roster and make sure I got the right person up. It's not healthy to wake the wrong person up for guard duty. It's not received very pleasantly. In fact, some of them been known to sleep with their 357 Magnum. If you wake them up the wrong time you might be looking down the muzzle. But as I was about to check that, that's when the white phosphorus incoming hit the roof of our mess hall, and that started the activities for the night. And then again, you have to give them credit, 'cause they had us. They knew they had us surrounded. They knew they had us outnumbered.

They knew they had the capability to infiltrate, and they'd done all that. We lived in thatched huts, and everything was thatch. Start with white phosphorus, start a fire, and start smack-dab in the middle of the camp, so any time anybody got up to move, whether you're going to your fighting position or anyplace else, with the fire going in the middle of camp you were silhouetted. So you're in the dark, but not totally in the dark. So their plan was a very good plan. But I soon learned there was no commo capability; they eliminated our commo. So my question in my mind was to get to Keith Daniels, my Commo Sergeant, to find out if he got any word out to the higher Headquarters that we're under attack. It took me a while to get to him, and when I got to him, he said he'd got it out. And then he got that one out and it was acknowledged.

And then he got out of the hooch, and then that was destroyed. My interpreter was with him. He's still with us. He was with us out at the 40th - 50th reunion here last month at

Agland. Was the first time I got him to talk about it. He was with Daniels, and Dan sent him for another battery at one point in the battle. And Mien went to the supply room and got another battery; by the time he got back, the radio was destroyed, so we went through the night without any ammo. So my job, knowing that there was no ammo, and knowing that one message got out, was to keep everybody informed. There was no way to do it other than to go from position to position.

It served the purpose of letting people, appraise them what our situation was, me assessing the situation, keep going. Plus I always believed a moving target's harder to hit and is still, so that was my motivation to keep moving.

Interviewer:

You know, the - it has occurred to me in studying history sometimes that there's not a bright line between - necessarily between training and improvisation. Because I think proper training facilitates effective improvisation.

COL R. Donlon:

Right, exactly.

Interviewer:

And so my question for you is -

COL R. Donlon:

Well put.

Interviewer:

During the battle, how much of this were things - how many of these actions - you know, moving hole to hole, for example, knowing that communications perhaps might be fragile. How much of this had you anticipated, and how much of it was sort of shifting on the fly?

COL R. Donlon:

A lot of it was shifting on the fly. In fact, there was one point where I was back by - I came from Ray Whitsell's motor pit, and that was a hard one to get to. I finally got to him. Ray - Ray was our former Marine who was African-American. There's a story there. He left the Marine Corps because of discrimination against blacks, but he had this burning fire in his gut to serve, and he grew up always wanting to serve. He grew up in horrible conditions. He was the son of a crop farmer, that the sheriff when he wanted to beat up his father, he would pistol-whip him, he would hide under the bed. He had horror stories. And I didn't find out stories like that until 25 years after retirement, visiting with Ray.

But I got him to come into the classroom with me to share his life's experience and his service experience, and in North Carolina he was telling kids about his childhood experience. And the kids were sitting there, "Really? That happened to your daddy?" "Yeah, in our lifetime."

Interviewer:

And what was his name again?

COL R. Donlon:

Ray Whitsell. Yeah. Always prided himself on physical condition. He still goes to the gym every day, 70 years old. He wasn't able to make our 50th reunion. I was really sad about that, but he's got his own challenges.

Interviewer:

So you were -

COL R. Donlon:

But I was trying to get to his position. But backing up on that, when we had our shakedown trip. our little shakedown 100-mile road march - after that we had a little session, and some comment was made. "Well, I forget, it might've been Woody. He says, 'I think that new guy Ray is a loner.' And it was a negative vibe, you know, and I could sense it, and I said, 'Well, let's just stop there.' So we had what we ended up calling our truth session. Had everybody share their personal life experience with discrimination against blacks or any other discrimination. So - and I says, 'We're going to talk this out and hash it out tonight, because we're a team. We finished 100 miles together. We

got a mission to get done. We got more training to do.

“We’re going to stay as a team, or we’re going to eject now. You give me a good reason why Ray should not be with us after you hear from him first.” So everybody had their say. And I said, “I’ve heard enough. We’re 726, we’re intact. We continue training tomorrow.” And we went through. Well, we basically said we’re - and other things happened in training - we said, “We’re never going to quit. We’ll never surrender. We don’t want to be P.O.W.s. We go down fighting.” We committed to each other that way. But when I finally got to Ray’s position, he’s been up literally by himself in his motor pit. In the little trenches coming up to his pit there were dead V.C. that he got, or somebody else got, and I was about to come over into his pit and kind of slither over, and he was about ready to turn around with his weapon and blow me away.

He went, “Damn - thought you were going to leave my black ass out here.” And I says, “Well,” I says, “no, we’re going to get through this together,” and we did. But going from that position to the next position, where Pop Alamo and Mike Disser and Jay O. and Isaac were, and Pop and Jay had both been seriously wounded, and had to man that mortar pit, and had some Nungs in there with them. And I was heading in that direction, but en route to there I could see there were sappers approaching, trying to get into position to blow the main gate. So you asked the question about doing things on the fly. So somehow, I thought, “What’s my best firing position?” And I just went into my kneeling position, and I got a bead on that guy, and I “Man, I got his ass.” [Pfooh] - no ammo. I says, “Shit.” I said, “Mike, throw me some.” He knew I had the AR-15, so he’s throwing me some out of the pit, and it was landing in the dark. And they’re popping illumination rounds, and I’m groping around and grabbing it, trying to slam that thing in, and it ain’t going. And I says, “Oh shit - it’s still in a cardboard box.” So I had to take three rounds out and put it in a clip, and I says, “Three is only” - all I saw was three bodies, three heads, so I dispatched those. Didn’t seem to be any more activity at the main gate, and I made it to the pit. They were in poor shape. We were less than ten yards from where the other elements were coming in. They were lobbing hand grenades. Mike Disser was throwing them back fast as they’d come in.

And I decided it was time to leave that pit, so we started to evacuate that pit.

Interviewer:

But these guys would’ve stayed there.

COL R. Donlon:

Oh yeah - there was -

Interviewer:

If you hadn’t -

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Yeah, there was - so I got up there and I saw what was happening at the main gate, and I didn’t realize at the time they’d already been in our ammo bunkers. And still to this day, I don’t know how much they hauled off and successful. I think they ended up hauling more bodies off than they did ammo. But so it got pretty hairy. But Mike had already been wounded, and Jay had been wounded, but Mike - and I had, someplace in there, I’d lost one or both my boots, and I’d somehow stepped on a piece of plywood. It was a strip with nails, and it was stuck to the bottom of my foot like a flip-flop. So I just ripped that thing off, said, “The hell with that. Hey Mike, throw me your boots.” And Mike Disser had big feet. So he throws me his boots, so I was able to keep on going. But I did - that was literally on the fly.

Interviewer:

Now, as you go from position to position, you’re tending to wounded.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

What are you saying to the - I mean other than from the one position where you said, "We got to get these guys out of here," and you relocate them. But for the guys that you're keeping in position, what are you saying to them?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Well, I was just - when I went in there, they says to me and says Conway had already been killed. He was our Australian. He got killed in the opening minutes of the battle, in that same mortar pit, so his body was there. And then they worked around that. And then I said, "Jay" - and Mike and Jay had both been wounded before they got to the mortar pit, so that was just - and the Nungs were holding on, as I understood it. So it wasn't a hard decision to make to get the hell out of there. And then somewhere a 57 recoilless rifle came into play; I don't remember all the details about that. We hauled that thing around, moved it around.

Interviewer:

Well, that brings up another question I wanted to ask, which is when you - and again, I appreciate your willingness to talk about these things. I know you've talked about it many times before, but I know it's not easy to bring up these memories. But when you think back to that night, do you remember things happening fairly sequentially, or is it flashes of things that occurred -

COL R. Donlon:

It's pretty much flashes, yeah. The sequence of things. I know when it started and I know when it ended, and I know I had difficulty getting to Brownie's - or to Ray Whitsell's position. I had difficulty getting back to Beeson's position. But each position had something. And Ray Whitsell, I shared with you what happened there. And then in Jay's position, there, that was the death pit, we called it; that's where the worst happened. And in between that position and Brownie's position was where the dugout was where we had the - and that's where John Houston was killed, so we had all that going on. And I personally think Houston and Alamo were both ended up being killed by infiltrators, 'cause when I found out from my counterpart that planned the attack that there were a hundred infiltrators and sleepers, that's when I believed that that's how Alamo and Houston were killed, by them.

Interviewer:

Now, as you went to various positions, were you telling them what was happening in other positions, or just keeping them focused on their particular sector?

COL R. Donlon:

I was giving them assessment on who was wounded and who was killed. And that was a hard thing to do.

Interviewer:

Exactly.

COL R. Donlon:

But I thought it was necessary, 'cause we were so small and we committed ourselves. We had to know. And I know when I told Woody that Pop was killed, and I could just see his silhouette there, [whoosh] he was just completely deflated. Very close, professionally and personally; they'd known each other for 10 or 15 years. And I think I witnessed, on the battlefield, P.T.S.D. kick in right there, 'cause Woody was that way the rest of his life. Never really got over losing Pop the way we did. And he knew Pop's wife was expecting, and I was the only one that knew that John Houston's wife was expecting twins, I found out later. So one of those things. But somewhere in there, and I don't know when, but I felt a need to get to Brownie's position, because he was my best Mortarman, in my mind.

What had happened over a P.A. set, they'd said, "Lay down your weapons. All we want are the Americans." They said it in Vietnamese and in English. And then there was a lull in fire, and I said, "Holy Christ, I need my best Mortarman." So I made it to Brownie, and Brownie, I says, "You hear that?" and he says, "Yeah." He says,

â€œYeah, I can take care of it,â€ and I said, â€œThatâ€™s it.â€ Next thing I know, â€œLay down your -â€ and I told people, and I told Brownie and his whole family, and everybody in Florida last week when they were at the 50th reunion, â€œIâ€™m going to my grave seeing a mental picture of this guy on our outpost in the N.V.A. in a megaphone, saying, â€œLay down your weapons,â€ and Brownie puts a mortar round right in his megaphone, and he never finished that sentence. So you know, every time I see Brownie now, I wave to him, and he goes [mimes holding a megaphone and pointing inside it].

Interviewer:

Wow.

COL R. Donlon:

Butâ€|soâ€|

Interviewer:

Now, as youâ€™re moving around, you are - youâ€™re wounded several times.

COL R. Donlon:

You know, I wasnâ€™t paying attention to those.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL R. Donlon:

They hurt. The one that hurt the most was entered this shoulder, and it ended up with a hunk of hand grenade was lodged in the joint. So whether you were breathing or moved in anything, it was just piercing pain, and the rest was shrapnel in the arm, shrapnel in the gut, shrapnel in the leg. And my Medic didnâ€™t know how serious it was in the gut, so he wouldnâ€™t give me any beer. Next morning we send somebody down to the village to find if thereâ€™s anything left. Came back with Beer Larousse, an old French beer. Tasted like formaldehyde. He wouldnâ€™t even give that to me. He says, â€œI donâ€™t know how serious that gut wound of yours is.â€ And I stuffed part of a T-shirt in it just to stop the bleeding, but it worked.

Interviewer:

Well, in interviews with veterans whoâ€™ve been wounded in combat, particularly in leadership positions, they sometimes commented on the fact that it wasnâ€™t as if they made a choice to persevere despite their wounds.

COL R. Donlon:

No.

Interviewer:

Itâ€™s just what they did. There was no, â€œOh, can I keep going?â€ You just kept going. Is that -

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. I didnâ€™t feel that there was any second gear or gearing down. It was just go as required, as necessary, kept going. It was - my Medic - when I finally got back to Beesonâ€™s position and found out he was okay, then I think thatâ€™s when I saw my Medic. And he said, â€œHey, youâ€™ve been hit seven times. I need to take care of you now.â€ I kept telling him to take care of somebody else. But as long as I could move, I felt I was okay, and then I started to run out of energy. I guess it was loss of blood and no more adrenaline left, but. So he sit me down, made an assessment, and he made a little - next morning, Doc Hickey came over, said, â€œWe made it, Rog. But the sons of bitches, they burned all my notes, and my bottle of Jack Daniels, itâ€™s gone.â€

Interviewer:

Tragedy, right?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer:

Well, just one final question here on the battle itself. Youâ€™ve described several vivid memories that you have of things that you saw, and that youâ€™ve experienced during the battle. Do you remember a particular thought in a particular moment going through your

head? You may not have articulated it to anyone else, but for example, did you at any moment think, "This is it," you know, "we're going to take as many of them out as we can, but we can't last?" Do you know what I mean - was there a particular moment where you had a thought that you still remember in that moment?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. I've written about it and shared it a few times. It was the death pit, when I got everybody out and I was moving Pop Alamo. And a mortar round hit near, and it blasted both of us back in, and that was his demise. And I thought - all I can remember is going into the pit, and I don't know how long I was unconscious. But as I fell, all I saw was a little blonde-haired, blue-eyed girl in a pink dress on a swing in a park. And that was my daughter the last time I saw her, when she was three years old. And I said, "Sons of bitches not going to get me tonight. I have to see her again."

Interviewer:

That was its own motivation.

COL R. Donlon:

So I've thanked my daughter for that many times, for that memory. I've never thanked her mother, but I ought to do that before she passes, 'cause she gave birth to her. Didn't do much after that.

Interviewer:

So how does the battle end?

COL R. Donlon:

They - in the - we - that one radio message I mentioned should've resulted in about a 20-minute response by air. 6 July. What happened on 4 July? What do Americans do on 4th of July anyplace in the world?

Interviewer:

Celebrate.

COL R. Donlon:

What do aviators do anyplace in the world on 4th of July? So they celebrate on 4th, and 5th, and 6th, and 3rd, along with other people, so it took a while to find the aviators. And when they got to the hangar, the hangar was locked, so they had to get a bolt cutter to cut the locks. They got in it and it wasn't fueled. The flares were not on the ship. So what turned from a 20-minute response turned into a couple hours. And by a couple hours into what happened, we were just one big ball of fire, and talked to the guys later. They says, "Nothing we could do - you guys were just one big ball of fire." So in the meantime, they tried - at that time early on, we didn't have such a thing as a Ready Reaction Force, Quick Reaction Force. So they were jumping through their ass, trying to figure out who they can get from where, and what access we could use.

So they got HMM-162, which is a Marine chopper squadron with H-34s, troop transports, no gun ships, and they got Nungs from other camps. They rounded them up, formed them into a Relief Force, put them on the Marine choppers. But backing up a little bit, when the flare ship made it, some Marine choppers came too, in the dark. They made noise, and the Marines that were on board wanted to land. I went to their 50th reunion, and they came up to me and apologized. Says, "Our Commander wouldn't let us land. We were so mad we couldn't come down there and help you." And I said, "Well, let me tell you, your Commander was the only one that had the combat experience. He was the only one in that whole Marine Squadron. He assessed the situation and said, 'I can go in and we all get sacrificed.'

"Or I can stay on station and let the enemy know that we know what's going on, and more will come, be after us. And that will be the best we can do until we can go back and get more firepower." So they stayed on station in the dark, dropping small flares - not much - the C-47 was dropping larger flares. And they left and then came back with the troops in the morning. But I was appalled when I had these guys apologizing to me, saying, "My Commander." That Commander just passed away a couple months ago. I stayed

in contact with him. I called him on 6 July every year, thanked him.

Interviewer:

So were you hospitalized for your - you had some pretty serious wounds, so.

COL R. Donlon:

I didn't think they were so serious. Yeah. I got - yeah, I got hospitalized, and the thing I remember about the hospital, they're getting ready me to go, and I was looking at the guy in the next bed. And the doctors come over to me and says, "I'm the one who should tell you - I had to take your leg off," and I said, "Oh shit." I heard that, and they doped me up and I'm laying there. I'm picking up my sheets looking down there, and I see all ten toes, and I says, "Well, at least I still got my toes." And then they carted me off, and worked on my leg, and my gut, and my arm, and my shoulder, and brought me back, and I was in pretty good shape. I talked for 72 hours, they told me.

Interviewer:

Really.

COL R. Donlon:

The nurses and doctors says, they says I wouldn't shut up. They came in and I didn't know what was going on. I was just talking, happy to be alive and talking. My Exec was next to me, said, "Oh man, we died, we're in heaven." He says, "Green-eyed gals walking around here, and clean sheets."

Interviewer:

So then after that, how long did you remain in Vietnam?

COL R. Donlon:

Well, I was supposed to have been a medevaced, but something got haywire and I missed; a little bit of planning, I was able to miss shipment.

Interviewer:

Can you hold on just a second, please? Okay, pause for a second. All right, we're back after a short break. All right, so after your first tour in Vietnam, what were your next assignments?

COL R. Donlon:

Now you're taxing me.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Where'd I go from '64? Of course, went back to Bragg, got on the circuit, everything happened at the White House. And they said, "We want you to talk to the press," and I says, "If you're going to talk to the press, check me out - what should I do? How do I handle myself?" They said, "We're going to send you to the Public Affairs up at Staten Island." So got up there, they said, "Okay, go in this room, give us a 15-minute impromptu on this subject. This one you use this script over here. This subject you do this." And they put me through a three-day session. I says, "Well, what you reading?" They said, "We want you on our faculty. You don't need any more training. You're ready for the press." So they put me, set me loose, and I've been on the road since.

So I went from Fort Bragg to Fort Benning to Career Course.

Interviewer:

Career Course was what, '60 -

COL R. Donlon:

'65.

Interviewer:

'65, okay.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL R. Donlon:

And I took - one time I took a airplane ride from, big long airplane ride from Atlanta, Georgia, to Columbus, Georgia. Yeah, and the plane was held up. They held it up for some gal. She passed and went up there looking for a seat, and there was only one seat left on the airplane. It was next to me, and she sat there, so thatâ€™s 49 years ago, my wife and I met, and thatâ€™s how it happened, on a 19-minute flight, and I chased her for 3 years. So thatâ€™s the best thing that happened in 1965.

Interviewer:

It was an important 19 minutes, was it?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Yeah.

Interviewer:

So you said Career Course â€™65, and then?

Interviewer:

Whereâ€™d I go from the Career Course? I went Bootstrap - Bootstrap University of Nebraska at Omaha. They figured I needed to put some kind of education on this guy. Heâ€™s been all through this training; now weâ€™re going to have to get him educated. And that was an interesting experience. So they decided to look at everything and put all of everything together, and I got a degree in General Education. They added this up and that up, and I said, â€œWhatever mix comes out.â€ They says, â€œWhatever you got in the hopper, we can put you out there for nine months and you can make it happen.â€ That was an interesting time, â€™cause it was â€™65 in the middle of the war, â€™66, â€™67. And come Veteransâ€™ Day, Coffey called. I said, â€œHey, letâ€™s show up in uniform.â€ He said, â€œYeah, letâ€™s do it.â€

So all the guys showed up in uniform, and there was this old guy. â€œHoly hell, that guyâ€™s a Colonel,â€ and it was General Grange, you know, it was Grange, it was his father, retired as a Lieutenant General. He was my classmate in Bootstrap. But we had a good time. The day we went to class, everybody was - and it turned out good. Everybody was curious about seeing you, asking the different service uniforms, â€™cause we had Navy, Air Force, and Army present. I went into my World Communications course, my instructor, professor was in uniform - World War I Infantry, with the brown collar and everything - Dr. Williams. I got a picture of him someplace with six or seven of us - awesome. One of the best courses I ever took.

So I went from Bootstrap to Korea. Interesting time in Korea, raid on the Blue House, the Pueblo got captured. I was drawing combat pay in Korea. I ran a special Reconnaissance School in the D.M.Z., infiltrating. I didnâ€™t go north, but we assisted people that went north. All we did was capture those that - we tried to capture those that came south, but they wouldnâ€™t be captured. They would eat grenades before theyâ€™d allow themselves to be captured. Very interesting - tense times in Korea during that time. Iâ€™m still in contact with some of the guys that served with me in the D.M.Z. at that time, so that was training. Good training, realistic training.

Interviewer:

Now, Tonkin Gulf incident, August â€™64.

COL R. Donlon:

â€™64.

Interviewer:

And then the gradual -

COL R. Donlon:

The Pueblo, â€™67.

Interviewer:

And but you get that gradual ramp-up then in â€™65,â€™66 -

COL R. Donlon:

â€™66

Interviewer:

Number of troops going up.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Did you -

COL R. Donlon:

I tried to go back, but the unwritten policy was that you don't go back to the same combat zone as a Medal of Honor recipient. So you have to - so I figured out later a way to volunteer. So I volunteered. After I volunteered, I told my wife. That was not very kind of me, but she didn't get too upset. Two years later she told me how upset she got. But I went back on an 18-month program with C.O.R.D.S. and all this State Department training first, and that's part. And that brings in - it was part of the training for C.O.R.D.S., but there was the time, in retrospect on my career, where training and education really came together in a serious mode.

Because first thing we did with the State Department was bone up our language; intense, heavy language training. But they tried to make it intense. We were easily distracted. It was during the era there were two-Martini lunches in between language labs. I don't know how we got through it. We did. It was almost criminal when I think of it. We used to have language lab, and then go have a two-Martini lunch, and then go back to language lab, getting ready to go back to war. And I says, "That's almost unpatriotic." But we had this attitude, "What the hell - we're going back. Are we coming back or not?" It was a bad attitude to have, but that's the way it was. But the point being here we were being trained to go back as Advisors in a different capacity; the other end of the spectrum.

And this is '72.

Interviewer:

Right.

COL R. Donlon:

And the thinkers had come in by then, and wanted to wind down. The Vietnamization kicked in. The decision in Paris had already been made. We were disengaging. And my personal feeling, we were abandoning them, and I still feel that way; we abandoned the whole situation. But we can't do much about that.

Interviewer:

Now, but you go back to Vietnam in '72 - that's right? But I would imagine the wheels were turning before that to get you. You know, you were - you said you'd found a way to -

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, I had to volunteer for this special program. It was an 18-month program, to go back on C.O.R.D.S. And that way, you could go - they had all kinds of perks, and it was crazy. I want to go back to fight the war, and to fight it, and then when I found out a way to go back, I couldn't fight. I had to go back as an advisor again.

Interviewer:

Advisor, right.

COL R. Donlon:

And I says, "Well, I'll go anyway. Maybe we can - if we advise them right and enough, give them support, maybe they can pull it out of the fire by themselves." Eternal optimist, I guess. But yeah, we went through the training, which was great being at the Foreign Service Institute. Then during that training, they authorized us to position our family any installation in the States where we want when we went, and with the guarantee that every 90 days, we could probably get a week with the family someplace. The family could come to Hawaii or some R&R place. And I says, "Man, this is fighting a war." I says, "I'm still pissed off about not being able to go to war like Paul went, for the duration - get the job done." In World War II, as a kid, that was what you heard. "When's

your son or daughter coming home?â€ Heâ€™s there for the duration.â€ That was the common answer expected and given.

I never lived to that. We went T.D.Y., so.

Interviewer:

When did you first - I mean obviously it was covered in the news. But when did you first become aware of the growing anti-war movement, and I understand you have very strong feelings on this. But when did you first realize how big the anti-war movement was becoming, and then how did that affect morale in the Army, for example?

COL R. Donlon:

Well, when I was going around the various colleges, and universities, and high schools, speaking, there was heckling going on.

Interviewer:

About what year was this, sir?

COL R. Donlon:

â€™65, â€™66.

Interviewer:

That early - wow.

COL R. Donlon:

And then one my sisters, Adrienne, worked for the Chicago newspapers, and she was in the hierarchy of the special assistants to some key people. So she says, â€Roger, you ought to come talk to the newspaper people.â€ So she arranged it, and I was sent to the Pentagon on T.D.Y. a lot, Chief of Information and they farmed me out on these different trips. So I went to Chicago, and Iâ€™m having a chance to visit my sister, which Iâ€™m grateful for, and then we had this interview. And then I got to the interview, and I got to the Q&A session, and somebody said, â€Have you seen this morningâ€™s news?â€ And I said, â€No.â€ And they said, â€Well, theyâ€™re demonstrating,â€ they told me, â€in front of the White House.â€ And they says, â€What would you do if you were there?â€ And I says, â€Well, Iâ€™m just happy Iâ€™m here with you and not there, â€™cause if I was there and I had my AR-15 with me, Iâ€™d probably use it.â€ And they were taking copious notes. And they went to the next question, and after it was over, I said, â€Adrienne, can I use your phone?â€ She says, â€What do you want it for?â€ I says, â€I want to call General Ware.â€ â€Whoâ€™s he?â€ â€Heâ€™s a fellow Medal of Honor recipient who received it during World War II, but heâ€™s the Deputy Chief of Information for the Army. He told me if I ever have a question to call him.â€ So I call, â€Hey, General Ware, I just put my foot in my mouth. I just want to give you a heads-up on it.â€ And I told him what happened, and he says, â€Oh, thanks for the call.â€ He says, â€Iâ€™m glad I got a heads-up on this,â€ he says, â€I can see the headlines now: â€Donlon comes home with his AR-15 and shoots up the clergy.â€â€ They were clergy demonstrating, so we cut that one short; it never happened. Thatâ€™s when I got aware, and man, it teed me off no end.

But having met President Johnson, it was very obvious that he was fighting two wars.

When he took Mother and I up to his bedroom, private quarters, and gave me a copy of his book, â€The New Society,â€ or â€The Great Society.â€ Thatâ€™s where his political mind and heart was, was trying to fight the battle thatâ€™s being fought again as we speak today out in Missouri. We didnâ€™t study our own history complete; we didnâ€™t finish the chapter we started. The train just went off the track again.

Interviewer:

You were talking about in the White House, President Johnson showing you the book, and

-

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

We were talking about the protestors.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Well, that's protesters, yeah, 'cause that's - that whole thing. When you asked the question about when I became aware of the protesters, that was - hit me in the gut and made me mad. The other time that I had a similar feeling is when I heard Johnson say, "I will not run again or accept the nomination." That was another gut - hit in the gut. And the third hit in the gut was when the first fragging incident happened. I said, "Here we are eating our own, killing our own; things are really going bad." And then when you look at that, we had the racial issues going on, and all this being fueled by the drug war, and we're not - that's a part of the story I didn't tell you yet; my Nungs.

Interviewer:

Please.

COL R. Donlon:

When I went out on my first patrol with Lei Tse-Tung, new Captain, showing off the AR-15 for the first time in Vietnam. "Look at this - new one." "Pfft - useless." He's telling me through my interpreter, "Yeah, it's new." And I thought he was trying to tell me, "It doesn't have the punch of my Thompson submachine gun, or my V.A.R." And he says, "No." He says, "That weapon will not be successful against the weapon being used against you, and going to be used against you." Then he said, "The worm has turned." I don't know if you heard me tell this story, but "The worm has turned." And I asked - and I had that blank look on my face. And he says, "Yes." And then what I do remember, though, is through the moonlight seeing him pointing at me. "It was you, long-nose round-eye, introduced drugs to China; caused the Empire to implode."

Meaning the Brits in the opening war. He says, "The intent of the Chinese is to make drugs available, and that will be the main weapon used against you. The AR-15 won't be effective. The helicopters won't be effective. All the artillery won't be effective. The drugs are being made available in the rear area and the campuses and everything." I've come to call it the weapon of mass destruction, and I still do, and I get on my soapbox on that. And we as a society have failed to address in the whole society, all elements, all disciplines, what do we do about the weapon of mass destruction. We've turned it in to be acceptable. What do we call it - recreational use? It's become acceptable. Well, it's going to be our Achilles' heel in my mind. How long did the Roman Empire last?

Depending on how you date it; 1,000 years.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Well, I want to come back to that in just a moment. Before we leave your second tour in Vietnam. When you showed up, clearly the situation in many respects is very different.

COL R. Donlon:

Right.

Interviewer:

So when you show up as an Advisor in '72, what were your perceptions? What did you expect to happen in this tour?

COL R. Donlon:

Well, I had to learn my job first, and find out what magic formula somebody dreamt up that was going to be so revealing that would help crystallize everything, and we would find out what part of the country was under V.C. control and what was not, by keeping records of how much rice is being produced, how much timber was being processed, how many roads were being opened, how many bridges were being built. That, and keeping statistics on all this, and it just pissed me off. I says, "Let's finish the fight before we start counting the beans." And I says, "I ever meet that guy who came up with this thing I'm going to give him a piece of my mind." Well, before I finished that tour, I ended up being

medevaced, and never got to finish that tour. I got 9 months out of the 18 months before I ended up in Walter Reed.

Interviewer:

And that was a mortar attack?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, there was a mortar attack, and I just dove underneath my District Headquarters, actually, into a bunker. Hit my head and didn't think much of it, but when I was shaving the next morning, I says, "Man, where the hell?" Half of it's gone, everything's gone from here. It's like somebody pulled a shade down. So it was a detached retina and concussion. I never - that's how I reported it. I wasn't going to put a Purple Heart request for anything like that. Somebody says, "You need to do that." I says, "No, I don't need to do that," I says, "That's just bad luck." But that was the worst ten days of my life, really, 'cause I ended up being medevaced, was blindfolded for ten days to get - 'cause they had no ophthalmologists left in-country or in Thailand. They had a civilian ophthalmologist there, but they didn't have them in Guam or the Philippines. When I finally got one in Hawaii, he looked at it and just - he says, "I just got out of school," and he says, "That's serious, detached retina. I'm not qualified to handle it." So then they put me - I ended up Walter Reed. Ten days, and I could tell who was there by how they smelt, and how they walked and talked. Ten days of quick learning on how to use your ears and smell.

Interviewer:

I mean you recovered from that, right?

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Yeah, I'm still - I get shots in my eyeball now. I can see you. I can still drive.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Well, and that catches up to what you were talking about, the drug issue. Clearly, from '69, '70, and after, the Army has a lot of problems, drugs being a major one.

COL R. Donlon:

Our society has a lot of problems.

Interviewer:

Race and - exactly. I mean the parallel between the broader society and the Army here. You were Stateside, then you were in Vietnam while all these things were going on, and you were also there during what has sometimes been called the hollow Army, in the '70s.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. Hollow - damn near imploded.

Interviewer:

So how did you deal with some of these challenges, like with the drugs, and the racial issues, and things like that? In your assignments, how did you deal with these things?

COL R. Donlon:

Well, you had to. It wasn't easy, and we didn't always conduct ourselves in a professional way. As I implied earlier, we enjoyed our booze as young guys, and -

Interviewer:

Yeah, it was the culture of the time, though.

COL R. Donlon:

It was the culture, and we abused it, to be perfectly honest with you. But for at least my gang, we abused alcohol; we didn't go into any drugs. I've never tried marijuana or anything. The only drugs I've had have been medicinal drugs, and thank God for them; but and try to avoid those. But the situation was just horrible. I remember at Fort Carson where I was the Chief of Training, and this was in '68, '69, we were still sending people over. People were taking shortcuts in training for one reason or another, and I refused to give passing inspections. One day I came across a unit, a Combat Engineer unit, and really had their stuff in order. I was heading back to Headquarters to write my first

passing inspection, training inspection.

Of course, they psyched me into it, too, 'cause they had a training film that had Henry Fonda in it. He was my hero. So I'm going back into Headquarters, and the Commanding General's going up the Headquarters steps. Some gal in a pair of blue jeans running up behind him - Jane Fonda. Boy, if I ever had a devil in me, I had it then. I wanted to grab her leg and pull her right down those steps. I resisted. But she was there to demonstrate, but the Commanding General disarmed her by going and meeting her at the main gate, and gave her a windshield tour of the Fort, including the Stockade. When she was interviewed that night, what'd she have to say about Fort Carson? She says, 'Deplorable conditions out there in that prison. Mean people. A lot of them are on drugs. All of them are on drugs or something.' But she couldn't say anything against the Command.

The way she was handled; he defused her. He was a smart cookie. I didn't agree with the way he did things all the time.

Interviewer:

Now, who was it, sir?

COL R. Donlon:

Became Chief of Staff of the Army - Bernie Rogers.

Interviewer:

There you go - General Rogers.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. He knew. He was a Rhodes Scholar guy. Yeah.

Interviewer:

So did you have to do, you know, barracks inspections, drugs, any of that? Did you have to deal with any race riots or anything?

COL R. Donlon:

I didn't. I never got personally involved in that. I got my tests when I commanded Special Forces in Latin America. I just put the word during my watch there's zero tolerance.

Interviewer:

When was this, sir?

COL R. Donlon:

In the mid-'70s.

Interviewer:

Okay.

COL R. Donlon:

My counterpart was Colonel Noriega. Not counterpart, but a guy I had to deal with down there. But there was some flagrant use of some drugs by the troops, and I just slapped down some Article 15s and took money away from them first time, and then doubled it the second time, and tripled it the third time. And the word got out, 'This son of a bitch means it. There's zero tolerance around here anymore.' They went so far as to plant it in my desk in my office, and I just said, 'Sergeant Major, from here on, it's your job to clean this place up.' I says, 'No more Article 15s. The rest will be court-martials.' It never happened again. But it was everywhere. I saw it get out of hand in Thailand in our Armed Force U.S. side of the house, so yeah.

And it still, I still - it's the weapon of mass destruction. I have this conversation often. I use that expression. I ask people, military or civilians, 'When I use the term weapon of mass destruction, what do you think?' Invariably, they'll say, 'Nukes, or biological, or chemical.' I says, 'You're all wrong. It's drugs, and it's happening.'

Interviewer:

One more question -

COL R. Donlon:

The Navy doesn't have any problem with it, though.

Interviewer:

Excuse me? Now, looking back at Vietnam, and with the benefit of a lot more life experience since then, we were talking off-camera earlier. Among those who study the history of the Vietnam War, there is a lot of taking sides on what some call the Westmoreland-Abrams comparison. Generally speaking, Westmoreland is search and destroy missions, where Abrams is Mr. Counterinsurgency. Some scholars argue that that is oversold. You, having served there during two separate periods, what would be your opinion on a comparison of Westmoreland and Abrams?

COL R. Donlon:

I could just take a small slice of dealing with both people. One of the first person to meet me during my 72-hour steady talking in the hospital was General Westmoreland, General Stillwell, Ambassador Taylor, all that. So they were all in the mode of trying to figure out how far we were going to expand things before they really got into the head count. They started the head count about that time. That was one of the questions they were curious about our place. One of the things that made our place unique was one of the early times that they left so many bodies behind - over 50 on the wire. And we found out later they carried a couple hundred off, so that was their modus operandi. Theyâ€™d try not to leave anything behind, just ghosts. But I never worked directly for General Westmoreland on his staff or anything like that.

It wasnâ€™t till I retired that I had personal contact with him. Got to know him personally, and Westy and Kitsy, his wife, and his children. Yeah, Norma and I and Kitsy and Westy were walking down is it Chad Street in Charleston, on of the old towns where they had a home. The girls were walking up in front of us, and he and I were walking along. He says, â€œWell, Rogers,â€ he says, â€œboth of us lucked out in the women department.â€ He says, â€œWe got winners.â€ Yeah. And I says, â€œYeah, youâ€™re right on that score.â€ So he knew how to pick his women, or he was fortunate to be picked by the right woman.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

COL R. Donlon:

As is often the case. Yeah.

Interviewer:

And then General -

COL R. Donlon:

But he and I had conversations. We did several things together. In fact, there was one incident - I mentioned earlier my displeasure of him dealing with C.O.R.D.S., and hamlet evaluations, and all that bean-counting stuff. I said, â€œI ever meet.â€ Well, years later, I was on a dais with General Westmoreland, Bill Colby, who was the father of C.O.R.D.S. and the hamlet evaluation system, and his first Agency job was in Southeast Asia. He had no long-term investment there, and I knew that he was the guy. So I was not - after we finished our thing with the Vietnamese at some leadership conference in Illinois after the war, we were going back to the hotel in a van. Weâ€™re sitting, Iâ€™m sitting right across from Colby, and I, â€œOh man, Iâ€™ve been waiting for this.â€ And I just said it that way. And I says, â€œGeneral, Iâ€™ve been waiting for this opportunity for almost 20 years now.â€ I says, â€œI had the misfortune of being assigned to C.O.R.D.S. and dealing with something I felt was premature, â€˜cause we hadnâ€™t finished the fight and weâ€™d started bean-counting and pacifying and everything.â€ And I just let it all out, and you couldâ€™ve heard a hummingbird fart in that van. It was dead silent all the way back to the hotel. And we get back to the hotel. â€œWell, nice meeting you there, Donlon.â€ And we all went our separate ways. In a little while weâ€™re meeting again. I bump into old Bill Colby, and he says, â€œBy the way, Roger.â€ He was calling me Roger, and I says, â€œMan alive, this is dangerous.â€ He says, â€œSome of us were thinking about doing something to show our respect for General Westmoreland. Weâ€™d like to organize something. I wonder if youâ€™d be interested in sharing your ideas with us.â€

And I says, "Well, not really." "Oh." And I says, "Well, if you're thinking about doing something to show our respect for General and Mrs. Westmoreland, I think that'd be appropriate." "Well, nobody's thinking in that vein." So I says, "Well, I'll see you after lunch." Everybody goes to lunch. Come back, I bumped into him in the hall, he says, "Congratulations, Roger." I says, "What for?" He says, "You are the Executive Director of the General and Mrs. Westmoreland Scholar Foundation." So again education comes up in the formula, and I had nothing, no experience at all. I just felt strongly about if they're going to recognize somebody, it's always best to recognize a team rather than an individual, in my mind and my heart, so. And knowing the Westmorelands as a couple, and their life story together and what they done. In fact, she's got a great story.

She trained hundreds of - what do they call the Red Cross workers, Blue Ladies, or - I forget the - anyway, that was her passion there. She trained all the Red Cross workers in country, American and Vietnamese supporters. She did many, many other things. But anyway, we got that started and that was a great thing. And we focused, the scholarships were for Vietnamese Americans, and all in the effort of doing something educational that would eventually help rebuild the bridges of understanding between countries and cultures. So we got scholarships to Mid-America, Benedictine College, Rockhurst College, University of St. Mary, got those going. Got General and Mrs. Westmoreland to be honorary co-chairs of a foundation. They got Bob and Dolores Hope to be co-chairs. We had a great letterhead.

Norma and I did all the work. Then we started to have grandchildren. We decided the grandchildren should take our priorities. We took all the funds we raised and gave thousands of dollars away for scholarships, and even had a work-study program where we sent students from the States to Vietnam to meet up with Ambassador Peterson. That was a really wonderful experience. But we took the residual funds when we folded the foundation up, put them in the hands of Texas Tech, who administer them there, and they grant scholarships on an annual basis to the Medical College at the University of Can Tho in Vietnam, continuing the building process through education by granting tuition scholarships there, so it's still ongoing.

Interviewer:

And then on General Abrams, you had a -

COL R. Donlon:

How'd I meet General Abrams? General Abrams came in-country - when did he go to Vietnam? '70 - I don't know. Well, I was there in '72. Who was there in '72?

Interviewer:

Right.

COL R. Donlon:

I guess he came in about that time. I'm not sure. But the first time I met him was after the White House ceremony. He hosted the luncheon. Chief of Staff wasn't able to host it, so he hosted it. And I put my aunt next to him, who was the Sister of Mercy, and always credited her for converting him, 'cause years later, he became a Catholic. And I says, "Aunt Ruth," I says, "you said grace before the meal so reverently that that planted the seed in General Abrams." It's not the truth, but it's a fun story, family story we tell. And that's actually it leads to the point that's how I got to know him, as two people sharing the inner person he was. Everybody talked about the rough Armor General, but he was a very spiritual person, very.

The only other time I saw him, in 1973, after I was medevaced or stationed and got out of hospital in Walter Reed, I was stationed in Thailand where I'd left my family. I'd play Santa Claus everyplace I'd been. And Bob Hope came through and wanted me to go play Santa Claus with him in Vietnam. I says, "Bob," I says, "I've already volunteered to play Santa Claus for all the dependents that have their families in Bangkok, so I can't make it. But I'll go to your rehearsal with you." So Bob Hope had his troop, had the rehearsal in Bangkok, so I went there, and really had showed up with my

Santa suit in Bangkok. Came home with pictures and showed them to Norma. "What are you grinning about?" I says, "Norma, this is all in the line of duty. Santa Claus has got Miss World sitting here, Miss Universe sitting here." I says, "Santa's happy. All in the line of duty." Well, Bob took his troupe, went to Vietnam, and I got my Santa suit out a couple days later, and played Santa around Bangkok. Went to midnight mass; busted up the people when Santa Claus brought poinsettias up to the altar. Some of the people thought it was great that Santa was a Catholic. Other people who were Catholic thought it was a sin to have Santa come in and desecrate the altar. There was mixed emotions there. I got that straight from the Chaplain, who was a personal friend. But that same night, on the rounds was to go by where General Abrams's family was in Bangkok. And as I approached their quarters, there was a walkway, and I could see the family gathered around the piano, and they were singing Christmas songs, and "Here Comes Santa Claus," they're singing.

And I banged on the door. One of the grandchildren - or children came over to the door, and, "He's here. He's here. He's here." So -

Interviewer:

They'd conjured you.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah. So that's a story about General Abrams you didn't expect. He did have the profile of Santa, the physical profile at the times.

Interviewer:

Well, we've gotten through your career up through your second tour in Vietnam, and we're running up against a stop time right now. Hopefully we'll be able to continue on -

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

And get into some of the other things at a subsequent sitting.

COL R. Donlon:

Yeah, you flush this out and see what's salvageable, and -

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

COL R. Donlon:

And if it's worth going on we can find another time.

Interviewer:

Well sir, we really appreciate you taking the time to talk to us today.

COL R. Donlon:

But remember one thing - I'll leave you with one thought.

Interviewer:

Yes sir.

COL R. Donlon:

Life is like a roll of toilet paper. The closer you get to the end, the faster it goes. And I'm 80 now, so don't wait too long.

Interviewer:

Thank you, sir.