

Interviewer:

Good afternoon. Today is the 6th of September, 2016 and I'm here with Mr. James Huffstodt in the West Point Center for Oral History. Sir, welcome. I'm glad you're here.

James Huffstodt:

Thank you. It's an honor and a privilege.

Interviewer:

Thank you, sir. Could you please spell your last name for our transcriber?

James Huffstodt:

H-U-F-F-S-T-O-D-T.

Interviewer:

Thank you, sir. Tell me a little bit about your childhood. Where did you grow up?

James Huffstodt:

I grew up in a little town on the Illinois River called LaSalle-Peru and it used to be the terminus to the steamboat route where they would transfer their cargo to the Illinois Michigan Canal, and my people had been there almost a century and it's a blue collar town, very ethnic. I grew up with a lot of Polish kids and Irish and Italian and good people, hard-working people. And it was in the '50s, it was a wonderful place to grow up and I have beautiful memories of those times.

Interviewer:

Yes, sir. What did your parents do?

James Huffstodt:

My dad was a - worked all his life from the time he left high school till the time he died at the local newspapers, an advertising man.

Interviewer:

Yes, sir. And your mom?

James Huffstodt:

My mom was essentially a housewife except during World War II and she was a Rosie the Riveter. She didn't do that but she worked in a munitions factory making bazooka grenades -

Interviewer:

Okay.

James Huffstodt:

-and other ordnance, and frankly, she was a heroine. We treasure a letter from her supervisor - and her nickname was Bunny - and the supervisor wrote the letter, and he says, "Bunny is very cool under extremely dangerous conditions," and they actually lost at least one woman and several were injured by explosions at that. She always downplayed it and made fun of it. And one story I recall she told again and again, she said - she supervised 50 women and they had in one part of the plant a little, small railroad that would - this train would come through loaded with all these - all this ordinance, and she was looking at it as she talked to another worker and she noticed that the cars were leaning and leaning and leaning.

And suddenly all these shells started to fall on the floor. Well as a supervisor her duty was to blow the whistle and clear the building and be the last to clear the building. As she told me, she said, "I did blow the whistle as I was running." [Laughs] The rest would follow. But we're very proud of mom and she played her role in that - in World War II.

Interviewer:

Yes, sir. What did you do for fun as a youth?

James Huffstodt:

Well, I loved to read and I loved to go to the movies. My passion for history probably began at the movie theater, and the '50s was a good time because they made films - you don't see them very often anymore, but as a kid, you know, I saw films about the Alamo and the Westward Movement and, of course, the epics, the Sword and Sandal Epics, Ben-

Hur and The Robe and Demetrius and the Gladiators and the Egyptian, and I thought these are great stories. And that led to reading about them, the real people, the real events, and historyâ€™s been my obsession [laughs] since I was a little kid.

Interviewer:

Yes, sir. Tell me about your high school experience.

James Huffstodt:

Well, Iâ€™m afraid I had my - I did have my nose buried in a book, unfortunately. It wasnâ€™t the book it was supposed to be buried in, too. It was something else. [Laughs] So I wasnâ€™t - I was an average student and I wasnâ€™t a great athlete. High school was a difficult time for me. My father had died when I was 10, and without going in to all the detail thatâ€™s hard for a young man to lose his dad at that age.

Interviewer:

Yes, sir.

James Huffstodt:

And so Iâ€™m not blaming anybody. I look back - you know, you can always make the best of things and I probably didnâ€™t, but it was not a happy time for me, but as I got older things got better.

Interviewer:

Yes, sir. Did you go to Southern Illinois University right after high school?

James Huffstodt:

No, I didnâ€™t. I went to the local junior college we called it in those days, LaSalle-Peru Oglesby Junior College and I spent a year there and then I enlisted in the Army.

Interviewer:

Why did you enlist?

James Huffstodt:

All those movies. [Laughs] You know, Iâ€™m amazed I didnâ€™t join the Navy because when I was eight years old I had a fleet of about 20 ships. I could name you every single ship in my fleet, but Iâ€™ll be merciful and not mention them. [Laughs]

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

But I was in love with the Navy, I grew up in the cornfields and I always thought I would join the Navy, but I ended up joining the Army and I think it was - itâ€™s always - motives are difficult, especially 50 years later to - why did I do this? I think part of it wasâ€¦ I think part of it was a young manâ€™s desire to prove himself and I felt - I had several uncles who had fought at Okinawa and one uncle whoâ€™d been in the Air Force in Burma, China, and they had such respect. I donâ€™t know if I thought of it in such simple terms, but I thought, well, if I follow - if I emulate them I will prove that Iâ€™m a man, that Iâ€™m a good American, and I will get the kind of respect that they received.

Another part of it was a very naive, romantic concept of war and what I was getting myself into, and Iâ€™ve had to say I was very immature and it didnâ€™t take me long to regret my decision. In fact, I was at the Chicagoâ€™s Northwest Railroad hub, an ancient - an old beautiful building. It was in one of the movies, The Untouchables, as a shootout there, and the train was leaving and I said goodbye to my girlfriend and my mother and got on the train and I thought I made a really big mistake. [Laughs]

Interviewer:

What year was this?

James Huffstodt:

This was 1966, July, and my hesitation, my [laughs] feeling that maybe it was a mistake was reinforced when I got to Fort Polk, Louisiana, with the mosquitoes and the humidity and the heat, and I recall distinctly Drill Sergeant Flint who saw me in formation and was still in the civilian outfit. And he asked me a few questions and he looked me in the eye, and he said, â€œJust remember, Iâ€™m not your mother, Huffstodt,â€ and he definitely

was not anything like my mother. [Laughter]

Interviewer:

Okay. Could you describe for me the day you enlisted? What was that like?

James Huffstodt:

I don't have a vivid impression of that. I do recall going into the induction center - of course, I was a volunteer and even then the protest movements had started.

Interviewer:

Okay.

James Huffstodt:

And a young man was there handing out leaflets saying that this was an imperialistic war, and very melodramatically I took it and rolled it up in a ball and threw it in the trash, and he said, "You'll be sorry." [Laughter]

I do remember that.

Interviewer:

Okay. What was your concept of what was going on in Vietnam prior to actually going there?

James Huffstodt:

Well, I think I - I grew up in the '50s and, of course, in the - World War II was such a dominating event that cast a shadow - not a shadow, that's not the right word. It - I felt like I'd missed something.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And I also had a conviction that any war the United States was in had to be a just war and a war that needed to be fought and I wanted to be part of it.

Interviewer:

Okay. How was your training at Fort Polk?

James Huffstodt:

Rigorous, grueling. It was very, very tough, and of course, in July and August in Louisiana it was unbelievable, unbelievable. I recall one incident. We were marching and, oh, people are dropping off left and right and, by gosh, the company commander drove up in his Jeep - we didn't see much of the company commander - and he started to talk to the platoon sergeant, I assume, or the ranking noncom, and they had a big conference. And the rumors started around, they said, "Oh, they're gonna march us back to the barracks or we're gonna take a long break under the trees or something," and finally the conference ended and they called us into formation and the sergeant said, "According to the regulations with the temperature and humidity reading what it does, you are now able to unblouse your boots and roll up the sleeves of your fatigues," and we resumed the march.

And that's not what we were hoping for. [Laughter]

And again, I thought, I've made a really big mistake.

Interviewer:

Now what sort of assignments did you have prior to deploying?

James Huffstodt:

Well, I went from training actually straight to Vietnam. I went from Fort Ord straight to Vietnam and I went right after Christmas 1966. In fact, we celebrated New Year as we crossed the International Dateline. We went via Anchorage, Alaska, and of course, part of the appeal to join the military is I wanted to see the world. I was - [sighs] I wanted to see these places I'd read about. And we got to Anchorage at 2:00 in the morning and we'd been up for it seemed like days, and they woke us up and said, "If you want to look out the window this is Anchorage, Alaska." [Laughs] "If you want to walk on the tarmac you can, but it - I don't know what the temperature was. I looked out the window and I said, "Well, I'll check off my list. I've been to Alaska." [Laughs]

The same in Tokyo, Japan, although we did get to see Mount Suribachi off the wing which I guess the stewardess said was unusual ~ cause usually it was shrouded. So that was good.

Interviewer:

Did you get a chance to go home on leave before deploying?

James Huffstodt:

Oh, yes. I had a two-week leave before I went.

Interviewer:

How was that?

James Huffstodt:

Wonderful, wonderful, and it went very fast, very fast. [Laughs]

Interviewer:

All right. Now when you arrived in Vietnam, where were you assigned?

James Huffstodt:

Well, we went to - we fly into Bien Hoa Air Base and as we circled the landing field several impressions. One, I had the - I had read about Bien Hoa and other bases there and in my mind I thought of a jungle airstrip from World War II and here this place looked like O~Hare Air Base - or O~Hare Airfield. It was [laughs] concrete, it was huge. The other more intimidating sight were black plumes of smoke all around. Bien Hoa was surrounded by I believe at that time up to 50,000 mainly support troops. There was an infantry brigade there for protection, some artillery, some others, but essentially these were the supply people and logistics.

And we thought - and everybody looked at each other - my God this is worse than we thought. We~re gonna hit the ground running and come under fire. And again, it must have been one of the stewardesses or perhaps a noncommissioned officer who~d already been there, and he said, ~No, nope. They~re just - those are latrines and they~re burning the waste,~ and in a few days at the replacement center I found myself doing exactly the same thing.

Interviewer:

Then you said it wasn~t a horrible job.

James Huffstodt:

No, it was good. It was a good job. [Laughs] They had these oil cans, they had the wooden structure, the latrine, and there was a metal hook on it and you just reached there and you dragged it out and poured gasoline on it and set it on fire till, you know, you got rid of everything, and as long as you stayed upwind, that was the key. Once you learned that it was really pretty decent.

Interviewer:

I bet it didn~t take you long -

James Huffstodt:

Better than filling sandbags, I~ll tell you that.

Interviewer:

And where were you initially assigned?

James Huffstodt:

Well, they took us to a replacement center - I forget the designation - and that was more to my - that fit my conception because we were in tents, it was pretty primitive. Within a year that all changed dramatically, but at that time it was like that and that~s the first time I heard artillery fire, which was ominous in the distance, and also we had some rifle fire on the outpost line. And a friend of mine, Norman Burhouse, from - I think he was from California or - yeah, I believe so - the next morning I said, ~Gee, you were on guard duty.~ He~d been selected for guard duty, and he says, ~Yeah,~ he says, ~We shot at a bunch of monkeys.~ [Laughs] They were making noise and everybody opened fire, so that was my hello to Vietnam.

And then after about two days there I was sent - at that time I was a clerk typist - I was sent

to Second Field Force Headquarters, which was right across this main highway from Bien Hoa Air Base, and at the time I didn't know it, but it was probably, at that time anyway, the safest place in Vietnam. They - my unit never had any casualties and I was assigned to awards and decorations. And being immature and being foolish, within two weeks I decided that that wasn't for me and I wanted to do anything but that, and I frankly was a pain in the ass to my super - Captain Wamsganz was his name and I'm sure - he - I admire his patience. I'm amazed he didn't say just, you know, suck it up and - 'cause I was a complainer, I was a whiner. If my year in Vietnam told me - taught me anything, it did.

It took about six months but I suddenly realized, you know, you make the best of things and nobody likes somebody who complains all the time. A little bit is okay. And while I was there at Second Field Force we weren't involved in the war but we were witnesses to the war on two occasions, very traumatic. One was a mortar attack on Bien Hoa Air Field, and they roused us out and we went to the bunker line right across the road and we got out there in time to see the mortar shells exploding on the runway in the distance. And that was a wakeup call; I suddenly realized - you know, the first couple of days you think that they're everywhere, that every Vietnamese is a Vietcong with a grenade hidden, and it reminded me of hunting pheasants in Illinois as a child with my uncle.

You get out there and you're young and you've got a shotgun and you're all tensed up and you're waiting for those pheasants to bolt and nothing happens, and an hour later you're tired. You've gotta unbutton your boots and you think I could be in bed right now instead of walking around this frozen field with my uncle, and then the birds appear and you're totally taken by surprise. So it was that kind of thing. And the other impression was right after the mortaring stopped we saw an aircraft which was apparently what they called - what do they call that? I think it was called Puff the Magic Dragon.

Interviewer:

Okay.

James Huffstodt:

It was an old DC-3 and they had one of these Gatling guns on it.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And you could see it up there. It had a light beeping and I always wondered about that, why the Air Force would have lights on a plane in a situation like that, but there was a beeping light on the plane and you could hear it droning around making circles. And suddenly in the night you see these tracers start going up toward the plane from three different positions, and I knew enough to realize that they were triangulating their fire. I assumed they were probably Russian or Chinese heavy machine guns, which I think were very close to 50 caliber.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And I think their tracers were a different color than ours, but they had them pretty well fixed, but he just kept circling, and he circled over one and as he got close to it that gun down below stopped firing and then that fire from the DC-3 was like science fiction films from the '50s, just a - like a light ray, like a death ray. It just - the velocity - I don't know how many thousands of rounds - and he just sprayed that area and then he went to the other two gun positions, and as he neared them they would stop firing. Later I learned they probably went down into their tunnel complexes that were everywhere. At that time I had no idea.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

Chances are they survived, maybe not, but chances are they probably did. But I thought

about that afterwards and I thought they know what they're doing. And then in the spring - I'm not sure of the month, maybe February - we were next to one of the largest ammunition dumps, and I woke up in our tent, there was a huge explosion. Not nearby but it was large and I mean I felt - I wasn't blown out of my cot but I rolled out and end up on the floor wondering what in the hell was going on, and they sent us back to the bunker line this time in the opposite direction and we didn't know immediately.

Later we learned that Viet Cong sappers had penetrated the ammo dump and there'd be these - it was all at night, I mean like the Fourth of July fireworks. And again, we were not in danger. We were sitting in bunkers or in a ditch watching this like it was a movie, and you could see - later we learned they were pads. They had different pads because you didn't want this ammunition to go up, but they had planted charges in all of them. So one pad would go up and one pad would not. We watched that for several hours and then in the morning it died down and we ate breakfast and we went back to our - to where we worked and I went to the awards and decorations, the little metal building where we worked, and started working and then there was a noise like an atomic bomb.

And it was incredible, and I - everybody in the building, the colonel, all of us, ran out and you saw this plume of smoke rising up not to the height of an atom bomb but I mean incredible explosion. And later that day a friend of mine - in fact, it was Norman Burhouse who had battled the monkeys at the replacement center - he whispered to me - he worked in G-4 - and he says, "They've just put out an order through the whole - we were Second Field Force - essentially of corps headquarters - he said, "They just put an order out on eight-inch howitzer ammunition, 155, to conserve because they blew up 10,000 rounds"

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

"of eight inch howitzer," among other things. They just obliterated it.

Interviewer:

Was this at Long Binh?

James Huffstodt:

This was at Long Binh, yes. And later, working in awards and decorations, I processed a number of Purple Hearts and Bronze Stars. The MP detachment was much closer and many of them - not all, I'm sure - but many of them went into that ammo dump that was exploding to rescue other Americans from that.

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

And I typed up the recommendations and things like that. The other story about being - and, you know, I was a rear echelon mother-fracker and we - for good reason - you know, we were - as I said, we were safe in all this. It was like just being in a movie, part of an audience. But the first time - within two days I was on guard duty and I was at the front. I was assigned to the - with another young man - well, let me back up just a little bit. We had an officer of the guard who inspected us and I'd been issued an M-14 and I was trying to lock the magazine into the weapon and I could not get it into the weapon.

Well, I guess I had peacetime thinking and I got it to stick, so I got through the inspection but it was not seated.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

Well that night man that I'm sharing this with had been an infantryman with the Ninth Infantry in the Mekong Delta, and one of the joys of being in Vietnam and being someone who's going home soon was to torture the fresh fish, and all through the night he kept telling me, you know, they - you never know, they could be here in a second and throw a

satchel charge in us and kill us, and it was 99 percent bullshit, but I didn't know, you know? I thought, is this - and then he went to sleep on his cot. Now again, he had been in the Mekong Delta in the infantry. He did sleep with his bayonet in his hand, so I thought he must know what he's talking about. At 4:00 in the morning, something like that, and I'm very tired, and as I recall I think I was at the main gate, and we had just rolls of razor wire.

But at the main gate it was sort of a - like a - at a railroad crossing with a bar that would go up, and there was wire there but it wasn't real thick and there were lights all along, and I blinked a little and I looked in the shadows and I see Vietnamese with the little conical straw hats and they were coming very fast and they were swarming through that wire and they were carrying bags. And I was terrified; I grabbed my M-14, I shouted to the other guy and I jacked a round in and tried to fire and the weapon didn't function because that magazine was not seated. And within - this happened in a few seconds - and then suddenly I'm surrounded by young Vietnamese women and old women with ID cards chattering away.

They were KPs. I had never been told - I mean [sighs] - you know, the officer who inspected us made sure that our buttons were straight and our pants - or our shirt was tucked in - but he didn't expect my rifle. He would have soon found out - I'm glad he didn't. I'm glad he was derelict in his duty, 'cause if I had a magazine I would've killed or injured some innocent people and I'd have to live with that the rest of my life. And I think there were a lot of incidents like that in Vietnam with American soldiers that - there [sighs] - you know, I'm not denying that My Lai didn't happen, but I think many times it was simply scared young men who made a mistake and I could've been one of those. And I think my lucky stars that that magazine was not seated.

Interviewer:

Wow, wow. That's an incredible story. Now how long did you stay in Long Binh?

James Huffstodt:

I stayed there about five-and-a-half months and finally after making a real pain in - being a pain in the ass, they figured, well, what the heck, and I'd been talking to some people from the Second Battalion of the 34th Armor and they were assigned around the corner from us - that's an exaggeration.

Interviewer: Sure.

James Huffstodt:

There was a road - a string of villages. I believe they were all Catholic refugees called Ho Nai, and that road led to Xuân Lá» which was the headquarters for the Black Horse, the 11th Armored Cav. And there was a tank battalion that had just been reassigned to the 25th Infantry Division that was spending their time there and it was during the rainy period. So they - I mean incredibly they took those tanks and APCs into thick jungle, and later I myself rode with them. Amazing what they did. But during the monsoon season that was out, so they did a lot of road patrol. So we were there and that was another interesting period of time.

The one - one incident that really stuck in my mind - and again, it has a lot to do with fear and imagination. I was at this one bunker that in the past they had taken some fire and somebody'd been wounded so nobody wanted that one, and it was kind of exposed. You could be shot at from behind and it was really a - you didn't want to be there. Well, it's the monsoons. So I'm there in this bunker and I'm, you know, fairly dry and I'm thinking, man, what a miserable place. And the rain, you can't believe the pounding rain. It's just like standing under a waterfall at times, and it's hitting this roof - I think it was a tin roof with sandbags on top of it - and pelting the muddy ground around us.

And there at that place we didn't have the wire lit up. I mean it was dark and ominous. And suddenly in the midst of this storm I hear this strange noise, almost like wailing or moaning and it just scared me to death, and I woke the other two up and we all were - and we thought is - are they going to advance? Is there a large number of Viet Cong or even

NVA that are gonna come out of this rainy gloom and are they chanting? What is doing on? Well having been raised a Catholic suddenly I noticed some familiarity and I realized that Catholic village closest to us was BUI CHI and they were celebrating midnight mass and they were chanting or singing Latin hymns.

Interviewer:

How about that?

James Huffstodt:

I mean it took about five minutes because of the storm.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

And then I go, ooh.

Interviewer:

[Laughs]

James Huffstodt:

Later - again, if I could follow that theme - later at Tay Ninh, which was where we moved in the fall, I was on guard duty and up there we had these very well-fortified bunkers that were in place. They were built out of railroad ties and layers of sandbags that set like concrete, and in the front you had an M-16 machine gun on the ground basically in a slit here and then to each side you have a slit there. Well the problem with that is to look to the front to the wire you had to get down on your belly, or knees anyway, to look to the front. Well, one night the officer of the guard came down and we were on a - we had different alerts.

Like if everything was fine, one guyâ€™d be awake, two could sleep. Another alert, two guys had to be awake, one could sleep. And this was a full alert, and he said, â€œSomewhere out there is an NVA division, somewhere out there, and you guys be awake.â€ Well one thing I had noticed - and this says a lot about how sometimes the American Army, which is a marvelous institution, but they fall down - those machine guns were useless. They were all rusted. You couldnâ€™t even pull - you couldnâ€™t pull the - not the chamber - you couldnâ€™t -

Interviewer:

Charging handle?

James Huffstodt:

You couldnâ€™t charge, no, no. It was just solid rust and nobody wanted to clean them and nobody was told to clean them. I donâ€™t think you could clean them with the tools we had. So those were useless, and then we got that warning. We also were at a bunker nobody wanted to be at because it was adjacent to the old French graveyard or French Vietnamese graveyard which was full of crosses bent at different angles, and it frankly was spooky as hell. Well, again, at 2:00 - I think Napoleon talked about 2:00 in the morning courage - well Iâ€™ll tell you I didnâ€™t have it [laughs] and I know I didnâ€™t have it because it was 2:00 in the morning and Iâ€™m trying to stay awake and itâ€™s hard. And because I didnâ€™t look through the front slit - youâ€™d have to get down there - it was muddy, it was yucky and, you know, you didnâ€™t want to do that.

Well I bent over looking like this and Iâ€™m looking into the wire and into the cemetery - we did have lights out there - and I saw him. I saw him weaving through the graveyard, through the crosses, coming to the wire, and he was carrying a sack or a satchel and I realized heâ€™s gonna - howâ€™s he getting through the wire? And heâ€™s coming so fast. And I stood back up. I remember I was tired, I was looking upside down, the crosses, the night, and - or no, I didnâ€™t sit back up, I remained down there and I tried to yell to warn my comrades, my two sleeping buddies. And I opened my mouth and nothing came out except a wheeze, just air, just [breathes].

Interviewer:

Yeah.

James Huffstodt:



I was so terrified. And then I looked at him coming, I could see - I could see him, and then he started flying and I realized it was an owl. It was an owl chasing probably a rat through the graveyard, weaving in and out, and then he flew into the air and it was like a science fiction movie, like a man transformed himself into a bird. My - I never did wake up the guys I was with but [laughs] I was rattled to say the least.

Interviewer:

I bet.

James Huffstodt:

And again, there was this situation - thereâ€™s - you know, hereâ€™s the bunk - we had these bunkers and we had machine guns that couldnâ€™t fire, and I remember mentioning it to the young lieutenant and, you know, I donâ€™t know at what point I did that but Iâ€™m sure I wasnâ€™t the only one, and he just kind of shrugged his shoulders, you know, â€œWell, Iâ€™ll mention it to somebody.â€ I think he - you would also draw - one guy would stay in the bunker the whole day, so you only have one man during the day.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And I think he told me, â€œWell, you know, you got some cleaning stuff here, a toothbrush, you know, see if you canâ€™t do it,â€ and I couldnâ€™t. I mean I donâ€™t think you could do it with just that. They may have been - needed to be junked. I mean they were solid rust.

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

And what a - it was sad commentary.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm. Now what company were you in down at 234 Armor?

James Huffstodt:

I was in Headquarters and Headquarters Company, personnel. However, I went there with the idea - I wanted to be a military journalist. Iâ€™d read way too much Hemmingway which I [laughs] - donâ€™t ever let a young man read Hemmingway, no, no. Heâ€™ll end up regretting it. So I wanted to be a combat correspondent.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And at the battalion level they did not have a PIO slot.

Interviewer:

Is that public information?

James Huffstodt:

Public Information Officer, which could be an enlisted man. They had it at brigade. I think there was a lieutenant and some people at brigade, but frankly, a regiment or a battalion, if you were a C.O. you wanted to see your unit and your name in the division paper or the, if possible, Pacific Stars and Stripes. So there were men in rifle regiments and other combat units that did that. In essence, we acted as stringers, you might say, a civilian term. And I really got into it and I had a mimeograph machine and I cranked out a newsletter every week and I didnâ€™t know what I was doing. In fact, when a captain interviewed me for the job he asked me about my experience which is basically working on the high school paper, and Iâ€™d written a column which appeared in the Chicago Tribune.

That was the extent of it. And he says, â€œWell, we want pictures taken.â€ He had a camera, a single-lens reflex camera which was kind of a new thing. It was to me, anyway. And he says, â€œDo you know how to use that camera?â€ And I said, â€œYes, sir. I certainly do.â€ Well I didnâ€™t have a clue, but I saw that it was in the box and it had an instruction booklet. So I figured Iâ€™ll read the instructions. So my first assignment - at that time we were still pulling duty along the roads, the highways, and there was a main supply route from Cu Chi, the division base camp, to Tay Ninh and then another supply - that was

a bridge emplacement in the - War Zone C, and then another brigade to the east which was called Dau Tieng, and those were supplied.

So our tanks would go out early and place themselves along the road, and actually that was pretty good duty for the tankers because in the daytime - I mean when they first went out there they might run into a mine, but in my time they didn't bother the MSR during the daytime. We didn't run convoys at night. We ran calvary units. There was the Three-Quarter Cav would run those nights - those night runs and that's when things happened. But I'm in the Jeep with the captain and we're bouncing along and I'm taking one picture after another hoping it'll come out, and I had loaded it one time the night before using the instruction booklet. Luckily, it was a 36-exposure roll. Well, we went through that pretty fast and the captain said, "I want this picture." And I said, "Excuse me, Captain - he was in the front seat, I was in the back I think - and I said - I'm sure I was because I said, "I need to load this camera." Well, I didn't have the instruction booklet with me and soon I had film streaming out all over everywhere and I was nervous and I thought, oh my gosh, this will be the end of my assignment that I love so much. So I stuffed the film under my fatigue jacket and snapped the empty camera closed. And he then said, "Okay, we're coming on this tank. Let's stop here and I want you to get the convoy going by with the tankers," you know, and I snapped the picture and, "Well, let's try this angle here," and I snapped it. So I spent the next I don't know how long snapping an empty camera by order. [Laughs] Yes, sir. And I was very lucky I didn't develop that film. It went to higher up to - I guess a PIO detachment, and that first 36 roll came out beautiful.

And he was so pleased with me because - that's outstanding; that was a phrase I heard many - that's outstanding. He says, "You're a natural photographer." [Laughs] And I says, "Yes, sir. Thank you." So that was my first assignment, which could've ended disastrously.

Interviewer:

Sure. But then you went back to your area and grabbed the book and reloaded the camera?

James Huffstodt:

I got better. Yes, I learned to reload the camera and I put my - I want to put this in perspective because, you know, 95 percent of my time was spent in base camps behind a typewriter and I don't want to pretend that I was a field soldier. However, in my capacity as an unofficial or ad hoc military journalist for that battalion, I went on a number of missions. The two main ones, Operation Atlanta, which was a search and destroy operation in the Iron Triangle, that was around Thanksgiving of 1967 and I was there for about a week on a tank taking pictures and talking to the soldiers. Of course, you know, I was an amateur journalist and - but let me finish my thought.

The other - we had our companies divided up. We had Headquarters Company, Company A were attached to the 25th Infantry Division. Company B was attached to the First. Company C, Charlie Company, was way up on the coast near a place - they were based at Duc Pho near Chu Lai, and I spent a week up there essentially on the road. And that was the most dangerous place I ever was in, in Vietnam, and I recall leaving - going through the Duc Pho village and in the other places we had been in daytime the Vietnamese, unless they were trying to sell you a soda or a beer or a dirty book, we were pretty well ignored. It was like you weren't there. And at Duc Pho when we left the city - or the city, the village whatever it was -

-the people along the street, the dirt street, were motionless, staring at us. And you could - the hatred was palpable. Many years later reading about this - so much of what I experienced in Vietnam at the time I only learned what the heck was going on by reading accounts later. I was a - definitely I was just an E-4, I was very low on the totem pole and I just went where they said to go and I didn't have much - in a way it's good, 'cause if I had known what I know now I would've been a lot more nervous, like the

Iron Triangle. At one point we were - they had Rome plows moving along and moving the foliage, and when theyâ€™d find a hole they would either send a charge down there and theyâ€™d yell, â€œFire in the holeâ€ and blow it up, or they would send these tunnel rats. As far as I know they were all volunteers.

Usually little guys to get into those holes. Well at one point - our tanks were outside on the rim with our guns, the turrets facing out to protect them. So weâ€™re just continuously going in circles as the Rome plows just ate up this jungle. Well at one point I got off. I donâ€™t know why we stopped but I walked over to some of the infantrymen and I saw this hole, and I said, â€œHas anyone gone down that hole?â€ And he said, â€œOh, yeah. Itâ€™s been cleared.â€ Now this - I should be embarrassed to admit this. I went down the hole out of curiosity and I didnâ€™t carry a weapon. I didnâ€™t have anything. And I crawled down the tunnel and there was a room and then there was an adjacent room. The top of it was open to the sunlight, although it was covered with foliage. You couldnâ€™t see it from the air, Iâ€™m sure, and they had an iron, oh, like a fence up there. And I assumed that was a place they could go and just observe or maybe just get a little sunlight and it seemed to go nowhere. And I found an American bayonet down there. It might have been left by the tunnel rat. I donâ€™t know. I looked around and sat there for a while and thought to myself, my god, this is the way they live, and then I crawled out. And again, it took a long time but looking back I think I read a book long after I was out of the service called The Tunnels of Cu Chi and I learned that those tunnels were extensive, that they went for 50 miles and two and three -

Interviewer:

And weâ€™re back. You were just finishing telling me about the time that you crawled through a tunnel and how it was very interesting getting out and experiencing some of the things that you saw while you were working as the - you know, the Public Information Officer for your company. Soâ€|

James Huffstodt:

For the battalion, actually.

Interviewer:

For the battalion. Now was there - you were working with tanks. Did you ever - tell me a little bit about being on a tank or being inside one of the tanks.

James Huffstodt:

Well, I learned to prefer the tank over armored personnel carriers. We had a lot of tanks and armored personnel carriers damaged by landmines, but the Viet Cong were very proficient at finding unexploded American bombs, 500-pounders, 250-pounders, and they would jury-rig those and use them as a landmine. So instead of just damaging and stopping an armored vehicle, in the case of an APC, which I think was 13 tons, in some cases they could blow those up and turn them over and kill the drivers. At the year I was there we had the maintenance - Iâ€™m not sure who was doing this, but when youâ€™re driving an APC - and of course I did this a couple of times. I wanted to experience what the guys were. I wanted to know what it was like to be a tanker or an armored personnel driver. So one time at Cu Chi I drove a - I drove one around. And it was very simple; you had laterals, so you would push this lateral and I think it would freeze one tread and youâ€™d turn around. You could spin it around if you went like this. They were a lot of fun to drive. But those drivers were constantly - when they were hit by landmines or ran over landmines, they were injured badly. So they extended those laterals so they could be outside. In my time, nobody rode on the inside of an armored personnel carrier if you could avoid it. Now the gun - you know, the gunnerâ€™s not closed up. The gunners would be on each side. I think they had an M-60 on each side and theyâ€™d be standing there, but as far as, oh, I think the - in the traditional - the training where youâ€™d be buttoned up and all that, they didnâ€™t - because machine gun bullets could pierce those things and they were vulnerable.

So I learned later - when I could I got on a tank. They were M-48 A3s and the boys had been trained at Fort Knox â€œcause they always said 52 tons of romping, stomping, steel,

but they were vulnerable too. They were vulnerable giants, and a young man I met at the base camp at Cu Chi prior to Operation Atlanta - his name was James Huisington - and I only knew him a couple days. He's the one that let me drive his APC, and for some reason they didn't have time to extend the laterals for his APC and he was very worried about that, and I remember him telling me the night before we left for this mission, this search and destroy, he said, "Jim, you know, I'm the only guy - I've gotta get down there." And he says, "I'm really nervous about this."

Well anyway, there was a big beer bust the night before. The captain drove a Jeep up with a little trailer full of beer and ice and everybody drank till they were insensible, and we went in to sleep and by that time I had seen some combat and I was nervous. What I found is the night before was the worst. I could never sleep and I often had stomach problems, but I guess it says something about people. I never, ever talked about it somebody else and I imagine others experienced that. But we went to bed and we were awakened by the Arc Light which was the B-52 strike. We were at Cu Chi which was gonna say 20 miles from the Iron Triangle, and they were softening up the Iron Triangle with these B-52s which we could hear.

Well, interestingly enough, we went back to sleep and an hour later the Viet Cong or the NVA, whoever they were, bombarded our air base, and frankly, I was still pretty drunk and I staggered out and I was disoriented. I went out the wrong way in that there was the runway and it's exploding with these mortar shells. And I went back and - but they weren't close. You know, they were a couple hundred yards away. But after it was over we're all standing there and one of the guys that we knew drove up in a Jeep and he says, "Oh, Christ." He said, "One of the hooches got hit over here and a guy was going home the next day and he's dead."

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

It was not in our unit but it was somebody. So that was not a good start to the day. And we went down and we went through Saigon, the Saigon suburbs in the armor and I took pictures of that, some of the best pictures I took of our armored column. And of course, Saigon was full of the REMFs, and they didn't even take - at that time they didn't carry weapons, only MPs could in Saigon. And we're going through there and I'm riding on a tank retriever, and there was an Italian kid - I don't remember his name. I think it might have been Bazelli. He was a real character from New York. And we're going through these and there's these Saigon troopers on the side staring at us. You know, we're all in combat gear. He comes up and he hands me a hand grenade or a couple of hand grenades. What is this for? "Oh, that's just - put them on, put them on."

He says, "We want to look like we're really -" again, we were kids, you know?

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

It was like play-acting. We wanted to show these guys we're the real thing, you know? [Laughs] And he also - I tried to interview him for our newsletter [laughs] and I'll never forget his quote. I was asking him to say something and he said, "I'll tell you what, Jim." He says, "Charlie, his shit stinks but he's good with his shit." He says, "Our shit's good but it's falling apart." [Laughs] I said, "Okay, how do I translate that into something?" He was a good guy. He had also told me one night when we got to the Triangle!

I was not present but one of our tanks, they had stocked up on WP, white phosphorus. I saw the tank afterwards. They were hit with an RPG and they were emulated in the tank. I saw the tank at the division - what do they call it? You know, where your vehicles are parked.

Interviewer:

Right. In the motor pool?

James Huffstodt:

Right, and it was just a dull rust, just burned. Well Bazelli had gotten the dead out and he told us one night, you know, the flesh had come off the bones, and after that immediately the - Colonel Ryan of the battalion said weâ€™re not gonna carry white phosphorus anymore. And so you saw things like that and it made you think, and you realized - we also - when I went in the Iron Triangle we actually were going into the jungle in these tanks and I was with a hell of a guy, a platoon leader, and I know his name - Lieutenant Miller - and I had known him at the base camp because heâ€™d been assigned there with Headquarters Company and then he went to command in the A Company.

First cup of coffee I ever enjoyed he made on the back of a tank in the Iron Triangle with a little C-4. You crumbled it up, put it up, light the fire; it tasted so good. It was hotter than hell. It tasted so good. We also drank warm beer, â€™cause in the armory unit you could bring beer along. It was warm - hot - and sometimes for breakfast I - I remember I had a beer and some bread out of a can and I thought this is a good way to start the day.

Interviewer:

[Laughs]

James Huffstodt:

But - I forgot where I was going with this story.

Interviewer:

The lieutenant.

James Huffstodt:

The lieutenant. Well I stuck with his tank. Several things happened. One, weâ€™re going through the jungle - well, one, we were aware because there was another area called the Hobo Woods that the companyâ€™d been in, and the Viet Cong started to - they would get our Claymore mines - if you remember, Claymore mines were like a - oh, what would you call it? They were shaped.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And youâ€™d stick them in the ground and it would project all these metal fragments out this way. Well they knew we were going in there with APCs and tanks and they knew that we were on top. You didnâ€™t want to be inside â€™cause thatâ€™s where an RPG would be. Well they would hang them in the trees and then we suffered some casualties. I was not there for that. I was just told that. So when we were going into the jungle I remember a great deal of stress because weâ€™re knocking these trees down and I was very aware that there might be these Claymores up there. The lieutenant was - he was a steadying influence, he was just - and he was a kid. He was maybe a year older than I was or two but he just really - he was calm, he was confident, and he - weâ€™re going through there and suddenly in the middle of this jungle weâ€™re going up a hill and I hear all this popping and cracking and bending and metal.

Weâ€™re going over a mound, a small hill, of bicycles. At the time, I didnâ€™t know what the hell they were doing there. Only afterwards did I learn that they had come down the Há»“ ChÃ Minh trail. Thatâ€™s how they brought their supplies.

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

Well, they got down there, they put their bicycles and piled them up I guess for the return trip. And sadly, we also went over some Vietnamese graveyards and crushed them with our treads. I donâ€™t think we did that deliberately as I recall, but Iâ€™m sure it wasnâ€™t a good thing. And - but that was - during that I had one of my most intense experiences, because we were heading somewhere and the lieutenant heard on the radio that we were diverted. Weâ€™d been doing protection for those Rome plows and Rome -

and also roaming around - and he said that the Second of the 27th Wolfhounds had just taken fire and had some KIAs and had withdrawn, and theyâ€™d asked for armored support.

So weâ€™re rolling along and as we were rolling, as I recall, we were leading our tank and I think there were three tracks behind us. They were armored - or mechanized infantry, the First of the 5th Bobcats, I believe. And I looked, and of course thereâ€™s so much noise, and I could see the last track and suddenly out of the jungle this rocket streaks across the air and goes right over the top of that track. And Iâ€™m looking at this, and interestingly enough the guys on the track never opened fire. We just kept going. [Laughs] And the lieutenant didnâ€™t even know about it - he had his ears on - till we got there, and he told them, he said, â€œWhy didnâ€™t you fire?â€ Just inexplicable.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

Of course he - the guy who fired that - again, it was honeycombed with these tunnels. And so we got there and we hesitated, and they lined everybody up and they called in air support and thatâ€™s when they came in. We had a cloud of aircraft over us all the time and itâ€™s - I have to respect our opponents. You know, they didnâ€™t have what we had. I mean we had such a preponderance of artillery and air support and B-52s and flame tanks; just incredible firepower and they didnâ€™t. They were little men in the holes that just hung on and come out at night and theyâ€™d hurt you. I do recall at one point seeing a cartoon and it said a Vietnamese legend about the tiger and the elephant.

That the tiger would leap out of the jungle and jump on the elephant and claw him and bite him and then disappear into the jungle again, and that analogy just stuck in my mind till now, 50 years later, â€˜cause that was - and things were different with the Marines up north and things like that in some set piece battles, but essentially thatâ€™s the way - in areas I was thatâ€™s how they operated.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

Just to bleed us and to make us suffer and make us figure this is not worth it. And - but again, I got off track. Oh, we were waiting for the air support and they came over incredibly low altitude, and that was my big moment as a PIO. I got a picture of an aircraft going over us with a tank in the foreground and that got in the Pacific Stars and Stripes and I was Colonel Ryanâ€™s favorite boy for a little while. [Laughs] But then we lined up and we went in and, you know, you had all these tracks and you had the tank and Iâ€™m top of the tank. The crew was buttoned up. I probably shouldnâ€™t have gone but, you know, thereâ€™s an incredible bond between men and they told me - â€˜cause at that time I only had a few months left.

They said, â€œYou know, thereâ€™s no real reason for you to go. Why donâ€™t you stay back here?â€ And I went; and Iâ€™m not saying that I was brave, I donâ€™t think I was brave at all, but I felt I should be with these guys. The infantry were on top of the tracks, you know, so I went in. And as we went in there, suddenly the ground beneath us opened up and you could see trenches like World War I leading - you could see holes. And I thought, my god, theyâ€™re all around us but we just canâ€™t see them, and of course when you have - and I donâ€™t know how many tracks. There were at least four tanks, you know, firing their guns. The tanks would fire these canister rounds and the machine guns; just incredible. I donâ€™t think we got any return fire. I mean why would they do that?

I mean thatâ€™d be foolish. Iâ€™m sure they were long gone, way deep. But we got there and those planes had been dropping napalm and the ground was just charred, and suddenly I realized that in front of us about 25 yards were the bodies of several infantrymen, American infantrymen. They had been hit and then the Wolfhounds pulled back and thatâ€™s when they called us in and the air. And one fellow on the tank said,

â€œWell why donâ€™t you go get a picture,â€ you know? And I said, â€œI donâ€™t want to anywhere near that.â€ And I left the Iron Triangle and within a few weeks the young man, James Huisington, who was so worried about the laterals, having to use the laterals, he was shooting a picture for his - just for his album and he waded out into the Saigon River to take a picture -

-of something and stepped on something in the river, exploded, and he was killed.

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

Lieutenant Miller, the man I respected and liked so much, he was hit in the chest by an RPG. He was up in the turret. And in fact, I remember when we went through the Iron Triangle the lieutenant always had a 45 on the cupola, and he was killed. I never saw any of the people I knew killed in front of me, but I did have people I knew that were killed, and of course that also fed your - again the night before you went out you thought about that.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And you realized that you might not be coming home. My other combat experience was again going back to Duc Pho on the road, the road that the French called la route sans joie, the road without joy, and later I learned that that was Ho Chi Minhâ€™s home province.

Theyâ€™d been there for years. Thatâ€™s where the people stood in the street and you could feel the hatred. There was no pretense. You know you were the enemy, you were the foreigner, and there I photographed one of our tanks that struck a large mine, probably one of our bombs, blew up under the engine, caught fire, and then the ammunition went off, but the crew got off. The driver I think had a broken ankle, and they medevaced him.

I took pictures of that but I never saw those. Again, I didnâ€™t develop my own pictures.

And thatâ€™s when I met Lieutenant Auer. He was a West Pointer and he was another officer - most officers I donâ€™t remember.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

I had very little to do with them. And Lieutenant Auer I remember, and if he is a typical West Pointer, by god, weâ€™ve got a great, great institution here, â€˜cause again, very calm, businesslike, no histrionics; he just was in charge and you knew - if you had a question, ask the lieutenant. That was a phrase - ask the lieutenant, heâ€™ll know. And I went on a road mission, and again, I didnâ€™t know how to shoot pictures at night so there was really no purpose for me to go. But again, I felt to experience - if I was gonna write about these guys I should experience what they do.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

So I went on this tank - it was called the Bitch - and like many up there they had put a - painted on the side of a turret, the turret, it was a king of jacks or ace of spades, and the theory was that the Vietnamese were superstitious so that would scare them. Well some of the pictures I took at Duc Pho were on the beach, which was a tank graveyard and APC graveyard, and I saw tanks down there, at least one, and there was the RPG right in the ace of spades, so that Viet Cong apparently didnâ€™t realize that he was intimidated by that.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

Well, weâ€™re going at night and going at night and the guy on top of the turret - Iâ€™m riding on the turret - his name was Gilbert, thatâ€™s all I remember - and again, like a bad B movie, again, tanks are noisy and itâ€™s dusty and he leans over and yells in my ear.

He says, "You made a big mistake. Get ready for a long, boring night," and then we were in the middle of the sun. I was floating in the middle of the sun and I had no idea what happened, and the next thing I knew I don't know if I was stunned - I think I was stunned. I don't think I was knocked out. I don't know. But I was on the right front fender, my rifle and helmet were gone. There was this smell of very acrid cordite. We had hit a command-detonated mine, a 500-pound bomb.

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

And it'd gone under the driver's seat. It had blown several bogie wheels off the tank. I got up on my hands and knees and I heard someone yell, "It's going up," so I took a running leap into a ditch and rolled in the ditch. And everybody's firing. We were - we had like three tracks with infantry aboard and they're all firing, and there were people up on the hill - at first I thought they were firing at us - later I learned they were ARVN - and there's tracers going all over and then I hear the screaming and it's the driver, Steve Burchette, from New York State. The night before we'd been talking - again, like a bad B movie, Steve said, "I don't want to be here." He said, "If I had any guts I would've gone to Canada."

And one year in a combat zone and you're talking to somebody like that, nobody questioned him, you know? He just said - well, it was Steve. He was a driver. And I ran out on the road along with a lot of other guys and we pulled him out, and there was a white star - there were lights. I don't know. I guess we lit it up. It sounds strange. You think - but it was lit, and there was blood all over that white star and that bomb had gone right underneath him. And we pulled him out and I had his head and his torso, others had his legs, and put him back down and he was in terrible pain and he kept trying to get up to look at his leg. And I didn't want him to look at his leg because it looked like somebody had taken an ax and just chopped it.

A huge chunk of it was - you could see the bone. I mean he was horribly wounded. And he was trying to talk but all his teeth were shattered and I kept holding him down, "No, you just lie down, you just lie down." How much time went by? I don't know, but here it is again 2:00 in the morning. It seemed to be a bad time. They brought in a medevac and that helicopter came in, and again, this is a tribute to the American soldier. My god, to come in - they were there, you know, they had to be there, and they landed on that road and we picked up Burchette and put him in that chopper. And as it went off, some guy yelled in my ear. He said, "They'll try to shoot the chopper down; open up."

So I started to fire and then everybody started to fire. That's one thing I noticed is if somebody fires everybody else'll start firing. And actually, they didn't, there was no firing. There was no hostile fire.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

But there we are on this road and the tank is dead and Burchette blood is all over the star and the sergeant was Sergeant Sheehan, another great guy, and he probably was all of 25, staff sergeant. And he and I were on that tank the rest of the night. Gilbert and the other two had shattered eardrums and they went off with the - oh, Gilbert was up there in the window of the chopper, so when I started to fire at everybody he started to fire too, [laughs] which I learned later.

But we were there throughout the night and it was a long night, and we could see this - it looked like a - I don't know. It was jungle but there was a place - it just seemed like that would be where you were if you were gonna set off a bomb, and we would fire at that with an M-79. I think more to reassure ourselves than anything else. I don't think we really thought we were doing much.

Interviewer:



Right.

James Huffstodt:

But we were concerned, and Lieutenant Auer called in artillery. That's the only time I saw artillery come in, and they put down artillery right along the - yeah, I remember Sergeant Sheehan grab my helmet and he says, "Hey, put your helmet on and, you know, keep your head down here." And it was a long night. And the next night we're sitting there and Lieutenant Auer came up to me - I don't think he really knew what I was doing there, to tell you the truth, [laughs] "cause he kept telling me to do different things, like you're not doing anything, come on over here. And he says, "We're gonna take a walk," and how it's about 7:00 in the morning. And we went off the road into the jungle - this was my one and only patrol - and he says, "I'll lead, you keep - you cover me."

That's - I think a West Pointer would say something like that. And I had total confidence. I didn't hesitate. He just had that ability, and we went out there and we followed a wire and then we found where they'd set it off, and they had taken - these were Viet Cong - they had taken an Army radio battery that the operator - it was weak and they cut it in half so it couldn't be used. They put it back together and wrapped duct tape or some kind of tape around it. That's what they used to set the charge, and it was a 500-pound bomb. I know "cause Lieutenant Auer told me and I knew he knew what he was talking about. [Laughs] And we go and then he says, "Well, let's look back here further." So we're moving through this jungle and suddenly we're in a maze of trenches and openings.

And I doubt if we went more than 100 yards or 200 yards, and again, he was a man with good judgment, and he turned to me and he says, "Let's get out of here," and later I learned that those trenches probably many of them dated back to the French War.

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

You know, they were - that same area near Duc Pho I later learned is where My Lai occurred and that was a different deal, and as I mentioned in conversation perhaps with you, you know, Vietnam is a hard story to tell because it depends on what you were doing, where you were and when you were there. You know, a Marine up on the DMZ, I don't know, I never was there, but it seemed that probably was more like a conventional Korea in many cases. But I think the average Army guy it was dealing with guerrillas.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And the end of that story is there was such pressure to declare the road secure - that was one thing I remember - well, we couldn't move tanks on that road without getting them blown up, but somehow they decided - I don't know who - that it was secure. So instead of chopping our meal out to where this dead tank was they ran a truck up with a driver on the road. And at the time I remember thinking this is crazy, and then I thought twice about it but I was out of film and I told Lieutenant Auer, "I'm done with what I need to do," and he says, "Okay." He says, "Hop on the truck." Maybe I thought I - I didn't - that's blurry.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

But I ended up on the truck with one infantryman and the driver and it was 6:00 PM, around 6:00 PM, the ocean to our left, the jungle to our - the ocean to our right, the jungle to our left, and the sun is going down in the west, and we're going over the same road that I'd just almost died on and other men had died on. And I'm thinking this is not good, and that's when my stomach problem started. And I think my stomach was the size of a golf ball. The infantryman aboard - and I remember it so clearly - he had a helmet

and he like had a tarpaulin, a piece of canvas like the French Foreign Legion.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

And heâ€™d been out - he was going home and he was happy, and to him this was just no big deal and heâ€™s laughing and all I could think of, youâ€™re not home yet, youâ€™re not home yet, friend, and we shouldnâ€™t be on this road, not in a - I saw what happened with a 52-ton tank. What wouldâ€™ve happened to that Deuce and a Half?

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

And I was very frightened and my stomach was so hard, just hard as a knot. Well we - and we were going - God knows how fast we were going. I mean the driver knew and heâ€™s really putting the pedal to the metal, and we got into Duc Pho and I got out of that truck and I had the dry heaves on the side of the road. And after that I had a different attitude. It wasnâ€™t long after that that I saw the man running through the wire who turned out to be an owl.

Interviewer:

Yeah. [Laughs]

James Huffstodt:

So I learned a lot about fear and I wasâ€¦ I donâ€™t know what to say.

Interviewer:

Well how much longer did you remain in Vietnam?

James Huffstodt:

Well, I joined that battalion around July and then I went home - actually went home a little early. I went there after Christmas and they had a program - it was called Operation Santa Claus and if your date - they called it DEROS.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

Date eligible for return overseas. If it was right around Christmas theyâ€™d give you credit and theyâ€™d send you home. So I actually didnâ€™t spend Christmas over there. I spent Thanksgiving - I spent Thanksgiving in the Iron Triangle and we did have a service there. Somebody had put up an iron cross and they choppered in a whole Thanksgiving dinner and we ate it out of - didnâ€™t eat out of our mess kits, so they had paper plates, everything you could want and that was memorable. And I often - not always but on some Thanksgivings I remember Lieutenant Miller and the other gentleman - after that incident where the tank was destroyed that I was riding on, I went back to our base camp, and frankly, I had a war story to tell. I wanted to tell my friends my adventures.

And I got there and before I could tell them they told me, and they said, â€œDo you name Captain Hocker, Sergeant Berger and Schultz are dead?â€ Well that was the company commander of Charlie Company and I had been riding around with them in an APC and a Jeep and I knew them, and I remember Berger, he always wore a rosary. He was a Catholic. He was actually a German-American. He was born in Germany and Dieter, I think, was his name, and he always was thumbing that rosary. And two weeks before my arrival in Duc Pho they had fought a Viet Cong company and three Viet Cong had climbed up on the back of the captainâ€™s track and Dieter had shot them off, shot them each one, and later he said to me, he said, â€œYou know, two didnâ€™t have weapons and one had an empty rifle.â€

And again, Iâ€™m going back in time, as weâ€™re driving when that first tank hit the mine that I took pictures of under the engine, we were up on a hill - it was called Redleg Hill - and Captain Hocker said, â€œLetâ€™s go, letâ€™s go down,â€ and we got in the Jeep and weâ€™re going down the hill and we started to go on Highway 1 - itâ€™s daylight -

and I was in the backseat and he turned to his - Berger was his operation sergeant - and he says, "Well, you got some guts," and I don't know what he said. And at the time I thought, well, how cornball, you know, what do you mean, guts? Well, what he was saying is a tank had just hit a mine and here we are in a Jeep with the radio antenna whipping back and forth.

I won't say anything bad about Captain Hocker - he's dead, died for his country - but maybe that wasn't the wisest thing to do and I think Berger knew that. I was oblivious at that time. That's before I hit the mine. And so jumping in time again, I get back to headquarters after having experienced that and I learned that the three men that I rode in, in that Jeep, had done the same thing and had been blown to bits. And Gilbert, the young guy on the tank, I later [laughs] ran into him when his company rejoined us in an ambush south of - somewhere between Trang Bang and Tay Ninh at night and we pulled off afterwards - they stopped our movement - and I got up. In the tank next to me there was Gilbert and he was talking to me, and that's when he told me that he had to collect them in bags and trying to decide what part belonged to which guy.

And again, I didn't know these men well but, you know, I realized - it had a - words are - I'm supposed to be - words have been my life but I don't have words to really communicate to you the impact of something like that. I never was in a firefight, a heavy - or any kind of a firefight, just a few bullets occasionally nowhere near me. So I'm not a hero, I'm not a combat veteran; I was just a guy who - I was just a witness and I was very lucky. You know, it was a sad business.

Interviewer:

Yeah. What was it like for you returning home from Vietnam?

James Huffstodt:

Well, you know, you often hear these stories about people spitting at you and all that. I imagine that may have happened once or twice, I have no idea. My - two things I remember is the song that was prevalent that I kept listening to on Armed Forces radio was - Haight-Ashbury was going and something like, oh, flowers in your hair -

Interviewer:

San Francisco?

James Huffstodt:

San Francisco, come with flowers in your hair, and that would run through my mind. I didn't sense hostility but when I went into the San Francisco airport, the indifference was overwhelming and it - I don't know what I expected but I didn't expect that, and I realized nobody cares. Your family cares but nobody else does. And there was one woman I recall, she was dressed like Vogue Magazine, young attractive woman, high heels, jewelry, and she was walking this pampered dog, some kind of Pomeranian or something down this glittering, modern corridor in that airport.

And I looked at her - and of course I just spent almost a year in a third-world country that was at war.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And she had this smug expression and I thought to myself, you don't have a clue, do you? You don't have a clue. So indifference, that is - although by the time I got to Chicago I do recall I went - I was downtown Chicago and it was snowing and I had my duffle bag on my shoulder and of course I had a deep tan, and this young woman came up to me and said, "Is there anything I can do to help you, soldier? Do you know where you're going? Do you -" It was a little gesture but it meant a lot, it meant a lot. So it wasn't unanimous by any means and I often feel the soldiers of today I have incredible respect for because of their multiple tours.

I don't know if I could've gone back for another tour. I have no idea. Maybe I wouldn't, maybe I would've gone to Canada. I don't know. And - but these guys and gals who go back for two and three deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, I'm

in awe of, in awe of, and I hope - I think the country is different. I think weâ€™re treating them better than they treated the Vietnam soldier. I think. I hope to god they are.

Interviewer:

Well then how did your conception of the war change after you had served there?

James Huffstodt:

Well, interestingly enough I had written my brother a number of letters and I found them - or he found them - and I actually read - I had just published a private - itâ€™s a private, 50-volume family history and I used those letters in there on the section I wrote about Vietnam. And what I wrote was this was - and this was well into my year in Vietnam. It was - so Iâ€™d seen some combat and Iâ€™d lost some people I knew, and I told my brother, I said, â€œThis has been a terrible mistake.â€ Weâ€™ve lost - I think at that time 12,000 casualties - and I said, â€œBut weâ€™ve made a commitment and if we want to have any allies in the world weâ€™ve gotta stand and fight it out.â€

I was a little surprised that that was my attitude back then, and as a historian - and of course youâ€™re a historian, Colonel - you know, when you look at documents that are primary from the time, you know, the memory is one thing after 50 years.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

The document is another and I was looking at it, I said, â€œOh my gosh, thatâ€™s what I thought.â€ So I could answer that very clearly.

Interviewer:

Thatâ€™s wonderful.

James Huffstodt:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Now beyond the basic issue items that you took with you, was there anything else that you took with you that reminded you of home orâ€™?

James Huffstodt:

Well, the good luck charms, religious - you know, when we were coming out of that Duc Pho village that first time I was riding on the captainâ€™s command track and they had a 50 caliber and a cupola, and there was a young Mexican American there and he had a large crucifix around his neck. I recall - thatâ€™s when the people were staring at us and I knew we were in a bad place - and we came out of that village and he jacked around in that 50 caliber and reached up, took his crucifix and kissed it and then I - that was a wakeup call right there. So a lot of guys had those. When I went in my brother gave me a medal that priest whoâ€™d been a missionary in China in the â€™20s and â€™30s had given him when he was an altar boy. Excuse me.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

And it was a image of the Virgin Mary and little Chinese writing around the edge and that was my good luck symbol andâ€™.

Interviewer:

Do you still have that medal?

James Huffstodt:

I didnâ€™t. It went to Fort Bragg where I worked on the paper and we went to Florida in a C-130 in a big mission to Eglin Air Force Base, and when I came back it had fallen out of my pocket, but I actually went out to Pope Air Force Base and went to the guys that cleaned the aircraft and - but it was gone.

Interviewer:

Okay.

James Huffstodt:

It's gone.

Interviewer:

Now did you purchase anything in Vietnam from the locals that you brought back with you?

James Huffstodt:

Oh, I didn't bring it back for myself. I brought gifts for people. I had a girlfriend back home at that time. I remember buying her some things and her grandmother, a painting, I think. Not too much. I do know that I - when I got to the 25th Infantry Division - well, I don't know if it was at the divisional replacement center or actually at Bien Hoa flying out, they said, "Now if you fellas have any weapons or any ammunition, throw it in this bin or if you have it on you we're gonna do some awful thing to you, you know? And I was carrying that American bayonet I found in the tunnel in the Iron Triangle and I also had a machete that I found in the Iron Triangle.

They were both American, by the way, and I threw them in the barrel along with some M-16 rounds that I was gonna take, so I [laughs] didn't want to chance it.

Interviewer:

Sure. So close to getting out.

James Huffstodt:

That's right. Let's - to heck with souvenirs.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

So I didn't have any souvenirs.

Interviewer:

Now after you returned from Vietnam, where were you stationed?

James Huffstodt:

I went to Fort Bragg and that's where I - one of my uncles was in the Air Force for 20 years and he told me, he said, "You know, you did this and you liked it in Vietnam - but I didn't have the MOS and I was still a clerk typist - and he says, "Jim, you go back and report a day early and you go to the post newspaper and ask to see the senior NCO. Show them your clippings - I had that picture that was in the Pacific Stars and Stripes of the airstrike in the Iron Triangle and some others, pictures and articles that had been in the division paper - and he says, "Just pretend like it's civilian life, like you're applying for a job." And that's where I met Sergeant Major Tony Garcia, World War II 101st Airborne; wonderful, impressive man, quiet, very capable.

And I interviewed with him and he said, "Well, we'll see what we can do. You may be hearing from us." And I didn't hear from him and they sent me to another replacement center, not the main replacement center, and the sergeant there, he was an E-6 and he says, "I'm gonna keep you with me, 'cause frankly he didn't like to do much work and there wasn't much work to do. The replacements would come in and you'd assign them bunks and he'd assign a few unlucky ones to KP and make sure they cleaned the latrines, so it was an easy assignment, very boring, and I was there two weeks and the sergeant, staff sergeant, came in one day with orders in his hand and he was incredulous. And he said, "These orders are for you, Huffstodt, from 18th Airborne Headquarters."

He says, "Is your uncle some kind of general?" [Laughs] I said, "No, no I'm not." And Sergeant Major Garcia had got me the job so I got to serve on the paper with some incredible people. Jeff Tarter was from Time-Life magazine, brilliant guy from New York. Joe Tetherow had edited the UC - USC Daily Trojan. Another fella, Ernst Robel, had been a UPI man. They were drafted [laughs] is what they were.

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

Yeah, and here I am, with a year of junior college and is - you know, I'd done my little mimeograph machine newspaper, so I was very lucky to be with those people and learn

from them and I was very lucky to be with Sergeant Major Garcia. I never met a sergeant major that didn't have his act together, ever, and he was again the epitome of leadership. He cared about his people and I'm sure he's long gone now but he was a wonderful man.

Interviewer:

So what did you learn from those other newspaper folks?

James Huffstodt:

Well, a lot of how to write a news story, you know? I wasn't - I'd written news stories but they weren't necessarily very good even though they were used, and gosh, we had - well, for instance, Bill DuBay was from San Francisco and he laid out the paper. He was an artist, gifted, and the Fort Bragg Paragliding Newspaper was featured in 1968 by Editor and Publisher Magazine for its layout because of Bill DuBay. In his part-time - in his off duty hours he drew Superman comics.

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

The - I didn't realize this but the artist that started those comics, after a while they didn't draw them, they just sent it out to freelancers. He was drawing Superman. He loved comics. I never saw Bill again and I tried to look him up about seven years ago. I found that he had died but I also found out that he'd been an editor and artist and was highly respected in the comic book field. So, [laughs] you know, these were the people that I got to associate with.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

I was so lucky. Did I appreciate it at the time? Probably not so much, no. [Laughs] I still was a kid and

Interviewer:

How much longer did you remain in the Army?

James Huffstodt:

14 months after I came back from Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Okay. And what did you do once you got out?

James Huffstodt:

I went to college. I went to Southern Illinois University and majored in history.

Interviewer:

Okay. And tell me a little bit about that.

James Huffstodt:

Majoring in history?

Interviewer:

Yeah. Was it - why did you choose history other than what you told me earlier about really enjoying it?

James Huffstodt:

I think I would really - I couldn't add to that. I mean it was - has always been the love of my life and

Interviewer:

Okay.

James Huffstodt:

That's what I wanted to study.

Interviewer:

And then later on you got a master's in journalism?

James Huffstodt:

I did. I transferred from Southern - or I graduated Southern Illinois, and I was accepted by the history department.

Interviewer:

In what year?

James Huffstodt:

1971, and I went to - well, you know, speaking of Southern Illinois - if we could return briefly -

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

This was quite a transition. I mean within five days of leaving Fort Bragg I was at Southern Illinois in a dormitory, and we went through the whole business. I remember going to a lecture on Vietnam and we had a bomb threat and we had to leave the auditorium just because a scholar was talking about it. And the first quarter I was there they burned Old Main, a beautiful old building, and that was where the English department and history department was, and I saved the Southern Illinois newspaper. They burned it to the ground and they're never sure what - it was definitely arson. I don't know if they ever did piece together if it was the Black Panthers or if it was one of these anti-war groups.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

And then, of course, during the Kent State shootings, they shut the campus down as they did throughout the United States. So I really felt - I really felt a man apart. I didn't feel part of my generation, I didn't understand them. Very slowly I - I mean it was a long process, but toward the end at Southern Illinois I roomed with an Air Force veteran and he was - he felt the war was a mistake. So now you're talking about 1970. This was after the Kent State shootings. '71 maybe. There was a big, big parade and demonstration, and he says, "You know, Jim," he says, "This thing was a mistake and it needs to end," and I said, "You're right, Paul. It does. We're not - we're just losing people for no reason." And that was during the Vietnamization process and - So we walked down to join the demonstration in the little town there, Carbondale, Illinois, and they came up the street and Paul and I stood there and we looked at these people in their bizarre outfits and the way they - we looked at each other and we essentially, if not in so many words, but I think we said, "Well, maybe Vietnam's a mistake but I don't want to march with those people," and we didn't.

Interviewer:

Did your peers - did your college classmates know you were a veteran?

James Huffstodt:

Some did, some did. Again, it was more indifference, more indifference than anything else.

Interviewer:

So after Southern Illinois you transferred to the University of Illinois -

James Huffstodt:

Correct.

Interviewer:

-after graduating from Southern Illinois, and is this where you majored in journalism?

James Huffstodt:

Well, I transferred as a history major.

Interviewer:

Okay.

James Huffstodt:

And I stumbled in Spanish, and as a graduate you have to have a B and I had a C, and I was tired of school I think to some degree and I didn't have the resources to go on

beyond a master's and so I talked to a counselor and he said, "Well, would you like to transfer into journalism? You can use your history as a minor," and that's what I did.

Interviewer:

Okay. And then did you work in journalism after?

James Huffstodt:

Well actually, you know, I mentioned to you before you could - to get a master's at Illinois at that time you could do a traditional thesis or you could do a journalistic piece, a series designed to be featured in a magazine or a newspaper. Well I chose to focus mine on Vietnam veterans at the University of Illinois. This would've been 1972. And that turned out to be a very good experience for me. The piece eventually was published in the Ottawa Daily Times in Illinois and I interviewed different people. One that I'd like to mention was a young Navy veteran and he was paralyzed and he was living with his wife who'd also been paralyzed but she'd been paralyzed as a young girl in a car wreck. Wonderful people.

And I went to their apartment and he told me how he met her. He said he came back from Vietnam - he'd been assigned as a Navy Corpsman for the Marines and he was loading a wounded Marine on a helicopter when he was shot in the back and his spine was severed. Well he came home and he said to me in the interview, he said, "I was just a total bastard." He says, "I didn't want to do anything. I wanted to drink and just get away from me, especially people who wanted to help me." And he said, "Finally somebody talked me into going to college and I went there," and he said, "they - I don't know if the VA paid for this guy but he had a helper and the helper told him one night, he says, "You need to get out and meet people," and his attitude was very hostile, you know, and the guy says, "Well, you're going to cause there's a dance -

-or a social here for people who have physical handicaps and I'm taking you there." And he said, "No, you're not," and he says, "Well, try to stop me. You're in a wheelchair and we're going." So he took him there and he parked him, and he says, "I'll be back in a couple hours," and the guy sat there sulking, this young Navy guy, paralyzed at age 22, 21. And his future wife came up in her wheelchair and said, "Ah, I haven't seen you before. Would you like to have a Coke or something?" And he was very rude, vulgar to her, and she told him where to go and went off to some other people, and he started having second thoughts and regrets. And he went up and he said, "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have acted that way." And she said, "No, you shouldn't have." She says, "You like feeling sorry for yourself, don't you?" And she says, "Why don't you be a man and cope with this?"

I was paralyzed when I was 10 years old. I think I'm more of a man than you are, and that was the beginning of their love affair. And when I met them they were married. He had become a consummate student. He was a graduate student studying the Classics, learning to read Greek and Latin.

Interviewer:

Wow.

James Huffstodt:

And they were a very happy couple and I thought to myself, again, you know, going back to the whiny kid complaining. I think that helped me in that regard too. I thought what do you got to complain about?

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

You know? Great guy, a great guy.

Interviewer:

So then did you work as a journalist?

James Huffstodt:



I did. I worked a daily newspaper [coughs]. I went to a college and I was a PR man and then most of my career was spent as a public information officer with first the Illinois Department of Conservation and later with Florida Fish and Wildlife and I wrote news releases, I was a media relations officer, I submitted - in both cases we had magazines, agency magazines, wrote magazines, but on my own I was an historian.

Interviewer:

And so that brings us to - in addition to writing over 100 articles on Illinois and Civil War history and Florida, you recently wrote a book called Lincoln's Bold Lion: The Life and Times of Brigadier General Martin Davis Hardin, and earlier you wrote Hard Dying Men: The Story of General W.H.L. Wallace, General T.E.G. Ransom, and Their Old Eleventh Illinois Infantry in the American Civil War. So tell me a little bit about what drove you to write about the American Civil War?

James Huffstodt:

Well, let's go back to when I was 15 years old and I was in Utica, Illinois, a little village of 1,000 people on the Illinois River and I'm in the hilltop cemetery on the Fourth of July, and one of my uncles, D.J. leads the VFW, D.J. wounded twice in Okinawa, Philippines - a man I had enormous respect for - led them up there, all six of them, and with the Boy Scouts and their flags and they did the ceremony in front of the Civil War statue. And after it was over my mom was there and my mom was born in 1907. I was - she was 40 when she had me in 1947. And she just casually remarked - she said, "See that grave over there by the monument? That's my grandfather."

I was stunned. I said, "Your grandfather was in the Civil War?" And she said, "Oh, yeah. Yeah, he was wounded." Well, I mean I said, "What do you know about him?" And she says, "Nothing except for that." She says, "But Grandma - her mother was still alive, she was 89 - and she says, "That was her father. Why don't you ask Grandma when we get home - or get - go to Grandma's?" So that afternoon I sat on the back porch with my grandmother, and she was 31 when Martin Baker, private, Eleventh Illinois Volunteer Infantry, wounded at Fort Donaldson, her father. And she told me these stories that were incredible, the detail; the name of his captain, Captain Henry Carter, killed at Shiloh, the name of his lieutenant, stories in the snow and sticking newspapers under their uniforms and in their boots trying to stay cold - being hungry in the snow and carving chunks out of a dead mule and cooking it. Totally - there were no romantics, no glamour, and I - that started a folk - an obsession, and I ended up through the years researching his unit. He was just a private soldier but I learned the poor man had been maimed, suffered from his wounds for 40 years, and - but he was with an outstanding unit led by some really remarkable officers who rose in rank to general, and I decided - this was when I was working for the junior college. I had a lot of free time. We were off for holidays and I had a month's vacation.

I would use it to research, and whenever - I spent two weeks in July of the bicentennial year at the National Archives researching my great-grandfather's regiment, and that was my first book, Hard Dying Men.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

A story of a regiment and their leaders, General Wallace and General Ransom. Well it took me 13 years to find a publisher for that book and I owe that to my wife, because we were watching Ken Burns Civil War - I think it was in 1990, 1989 - and that manuscript had been up on the closet shelf for a long time. You know, those 13 years I - and I wasn't pulling it out every week.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

I'd try it and get rejected and - she says, "You know, there's so much interest,

why don't you try it again? I did and very small publisher picked it up. And anyway, after 13 years I got it published and then another book - two more books followed and then that led me to this book, and this has been my greatest achievement. Why did I take eight years of my life to tell a story of an obscure, unknown Civil War general? I guess because 25 years ago I was reading a book, *Generals in Blue* by Ira - or Ezra Warner.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

And it says a little bit about my interest that it's really a reference work and I was reading it. [Laughs] I came upon this man and Warner said - and I paraphrase - well, here, I think it's in the front of the book. Let me - if you give me just a moment!

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

The book - it says, "When first reading these haunting words 40 years ago I was puzzled and saddened that such an extraordinary soldier as General Martin Davis should've been so quickly forgotten." Warner had written at the end of his biographical account of Hardin's life, he said, "Hardin embarked upon a career in the Civil War which has few parallels in the annals of the army for gallantry and wounds sustained and the obscurity into which he had lapsed a generation before his death," and those words spoke to me powerfully and I thought this is not right that a man like this who lost an arm, who faced death, four wounds, fought at Gettysburg, fought in the campaign against Lee under Grant -

-fought in defense of Washington during Early's raid, that a man of this quality should be remembered. And actually, that was the motivation for my first book about my great-grandfather's regiment. These men should be remembered. I think soldiers fight for many things but part of it is they fight to be remembered. So this was a wonderful, wonderful accomplishment to see this in print.

Interviewer:

Right.

James Huffstodt:

I can't add anymore to it than that.

Interviewer:

Well, what lessons do you hope the reader draws out of your book?

James Huffstodt:

That's a - you ask some tough questions. That's the toughest question you've asked. What lessons do I hope? I didn't write the book with the idea that I was trying to teach anybody a lesson.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

I wrote the book trying to present a man's life in the context of his time and that hopefully his actions and his character would inspire the reader. There's a letter he wrote - there's so many aspects of Hardin's life that are fascinating. He was a - he knew Lincoln. He was a protege of President Lincoln. His father was one of Lincoln's best friends. And he was everywhere. You know, he was at Harper's Ferry when John Brown was there, he was at Gettysburg at the battle, he was in Washington when Lincoln was assassinated, he was in the White House writing his mother, a friend of Lincoln, two days afterwards while they're preparing the president to be buried. General Hardin in the White House writing his mother about this great, good man dying. He was wounded and yet I found he was afraid. That might not - I don't know if he was afraid, but his mother writes after his first terrible wound that he's nervous, he's

nervous, and yet despite four wounds he went back to command his men and, you know, thatâ€™s remarkable.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

That is remarkable. He couldâ€™ve - two of those wounds were serious enough - one he lost his arm, it was amputated - he couldâ€™ve, with honor, which meant a lot - and they werenâ€™t - I think honor still means a great deal. Weâ€™re just afraid to say it.

Weâ€™re afraid somebody might laugh, but it is. Maybe here at West Point - or no, I wonâ€™t say maybe - I think here you can speak the truth. Honor means something.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

A name means something and hereâ€™s a man who embodies all of that, an 1859 graduate of West Point. He knew Custer. He knew Fighting Joe Wheeler. They were fellow students. His instructors - he knew Lee as a commandant to the post and, you know, in the scheme of things was he a Sherman or a Sheridan? No, he wasnâ€™t. Was he a genius of strategy? No, he wasnâ€™t. But he was a good man and a good soldier and a good American, and by god, we gotta remember people like that.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Sure. So looking back on your own military experience, what do you think from your own military experience either contributed or fed into your writing as youâ€™re writing - as youâ€™re looking back at these soldiers from the Civil War, what from you entered into your writing?

James Huffstodt:

I thought that that other question was the toughest you threw at me but youâ€™re getting even tougher. [Laughter]

That is a - what a challenge. Thatâ€™s a Mount Everest of questions.

Interviewer:

I mean you said these men should be remembered, right?

James Huffstodt:

Right.

Interviewer:

And then, you know, you have friends or folks you served with that are on the wall -

James Huffstodt:

On the wall.

Interviewer:

-in Washington.

James Huffstodt:

Yes.

Interviewer:

And so remembering the soldiers is an important part for the folks who served in Vietnam and youâ€™re trying to remember somebody from the Civil War here.

James Huffstodt:

All right. I think a nation that forgets its past and forgets its zeros, weâ€™re in trouble if itâ€™s come to that. We really are in trouble. And, you know, since the â€™20s weâ€™ve been - in the field of history, I - what do they call them? The - â€œHistory is bunk,â€ Ford said, and weâ€™ve gotten into this debunking, but weâ€™ve gone - the pendulumâ€™s swung way too far the other way. I mean, yes, Jefferson was a slaveholder and, yes, Robert E. Lee owned slaves. Thatâ€™s one aspect. They were human beings who lived in a different time, but we need to remember what they did and what they accomplished. They built this country, and we need heroes. God Almighty, we need heroes. I think we have a lot of them and you men who - and women - whoâ€™ve served in Iraq and Afghanistan, you have exemplified the best of this country.

And you deserve respect and you deserve to be remembered. Not every individual can be remembered as with Hardin. I see him as a representative figure of a strong - he was such an idealist, and when he graduated West Point he wrote his best friend in the world, a former black slave, Dolly, and Dolly described herself as "œyour best friend in life." They knew each other. She was literate. He wrote her a letter upon graduating West Point and talked about the importance of learning American history and to remember the sacrifices of the American Revolution. To the generation of the Civil War the Revolution was very real, and he was such an idealist and such a good man.

He was a Catholic convert, he was a very genuine man of faith, and just on every level - I wish I knew him. I wish I™d met him.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

But I™ve met men like him and I know there are a lot like him here at West Point.

Interviewer:

Now what lasting memories do you have of your service in Vietnam?

James Huffstodt:

I think we™ve covered them all, the ones that really stick out. I will say this: After the train left Northwestern Station in Chicago, I hated the Army every day I was in it, [laughs] but with the perspective of time I look back and I realized that I benefitted in so many ways. I learned that, no, I was not an ideal soldier. I was not a John Wayne, but I was good as a writer, as a chronicler, as an observer, as a man - not a hero himself, but someone who recognized heroes, heroism, in others, and wants to recognize that and hold these men and women up as our ideals, as our goals. I know we™re all human, we fall, we commit sins, we -

-we™re prideful, we™re selfish, but yet on occasion we rise to incredible challenges and we forget that sometimes today. We focus on all the negatives. I saw General Westmoreland in Vietnam at Second Field Force Headquarters, he walked by me. He was another who had the aura of command. I mean he stood out and I saluted him and, you know, that was a very brief moment in my life but I remember it.

Interviewer:

Sure.

James Huffstodt:

By god, he looked like a general, he looked like a hero, and I think he was, I think he was. But he was unfortunate enough to have a - have to fight in a war that we probably shouldn™t have been in.

Interviewer:

Yeah. Well, sir, thank you for being here today. This was a privilege to talk with you and it was an honor to hear all your stories.

James Huffstodt:

Well thank you. I was - I™m very blessed to be here and thank you, sir.