

Interviewer:

Could you state your name, please?

MG N. Creighton:

My name is Neal Creighton.

Interviewer:

And could you spell your last name for the record?

MG N. Creighton:

C-R-E-I-G-H-T-O-N, Creighton, and the first name is N-E-A-L, and that's the one that usually gets misspelled, so.

Interviewer:

And your age, please?

MG N. Creighton:

My age is, unfortunately, 81.

Interviewer:

And your rank in Vietnam?

MG N. Creighton:

My rank in Vietnam, I was had been a Lieutenant Colonel for a few months when I went to Vietnam, so I was a Lieutenant Colonel at that time.

Interviewer:

And your Unit?

MG N. Creighton:

I spent my full time in that tour with the 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment.

Interviewer:

And your years in Vietnam, your tour.

MG N. Creighton:

I went over there in July of 1967, and I departed in the following July, 1968. So I was there '67 and '68.

Interviewer:

And today's date is

MG N. Creighton:

Today's date is the 8th of August.

Interviewer:

2011.

MG N. Creighton:

That was a trick question.

Interviewer:

There are no trick questions. You were class of West Point class of 1953.

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, I was.

Interviewer:

How did you come to join the military?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, it was almost inevitable, because my father was a career soldier, having come in during World War I. After World War I he decided to stay in, and he actually stayed in for 30 years. Was an Air Force pilot he was a different kind of Air Force pilot. He didn't fly airplanes, though he did fly in airplanes and was rated there also, but he was mainly a balloon and dirigible pilot.

Interviewer:

Oh, really.

MG N. Creighton:

And so he retired as the Commander of Scott Air Force Base in 1947. But I was born in 1930

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

MG N. Creighton:

And so I had a number of years as an Army brat.

Interviewer:

And heâ€•was he on the Shenandoah or the Los Angeles?

MG N. Creighton:

No, but he knew all the people on the Shenandoah and Los Angeles, because it was a very tight and very small community. As a matter of fact there was a time in the 1920s in the Army Air Corps there were only four Colonels, and almost everybody knew everybody. And they had an interesting thing back as they got into the â€™30sâ€•you had to keep your flying time up, and it was very hard. And so the way they did it was every now and then fly across country, and so we were at theâ€•living at the bases, and all these people would fly in.

And youâ€™d see people like Vandenberg and Brereton and all theseâ€•these names that the Air Force history knows, who would come to our house while I was a youngster. So I guess it was inevitable that I wanted to follow in those footsteps.

Interviewer:

Did you everâ€•I just have to ask, did you ever go up on a dirigible? Did your dad ever take you up?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, he never took me up, as a matter of fact, but Goodyearâ€™s been kind enough to take me up, and Iâ€™ve been up with the Goodyear. And I used to go up when I was a kid at Scott Field in the older aircraft. But it was really never an Army aircraftâ€•it was usually a civilian friend that we flew with.

Interviewer:

So how did youâ€•soâ€•so your going to West Point, you said, was always preordained.

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, it was, because thatâ€™s what I knew, and thatâ€™s what I wanted to do, and my father was not a West Pointer, but when I talked to him about going into the military, he said, â€œWell, if youâ€™re going in the military, my advice is to start off at West Point.â€ And so he was the guy that recommended it.

Interviewer:

Tell meâ€•can you tell me a little bit about West Point in the early â€™50s? What was it like to be here in the early 1950s?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, in the early 1950s, it was quite different from what it is now, and Iâ€™ve had the chance to watch it over the years. Of course, the big war was over, and if you came into the militaryâ€•and the Cold War was just, just starting. And so we really didnâ€™t know what our future was going to be. It started to evolve just as I came in, and I came â€™49, because the Cold War became hotter, and NATO was founded, and so now we were looking, unfortunately, at a new enemy. But West Point, we only had 2,400 cadets in those days, and so we werenâ€™t all that large.

MG N. Creighton:

{.:text} And I have to say, compared to todayâ€™s competition it wasnâ€™t that hard to get into the Military Academy. There wasnâ€™t the demand, and there wasnâ€™t the career, and the civilians had looked back atâ€•at the Army as, you know, the World War II Army, and now that was no longer there. And of course, when we came in, Korea hadnâ€™t started yet, andâ€•but it did start, actually, one year into it, in 1950, when we were here.

Interviewer:

What was the effect of the outbreak of the Korean War upon the Point?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, it wasâ€•I donâ€™t know if it was detrimental, but it was a shock, because what happenedâ€•and we were plebes, and that summer we became yearlings. And the war

startedâ€•I have to think back, but somewhere around that timeâ€•and the people dying over there wereâ€•were the firsties that had just graduated, and so we all knew, and then the next classes all went over there. And we were the first class that graduated, and we graduated just before the war ended. In fact they sent all of our engineer graduates over there, but they got there just maybe two weeks or something like that before the war ended.

MG N. Creighton:

{.text} So it was a very personal thing. And, like myself, a lot of theâ€•theâ€•the cadets were sons of the military. I remember there was a cadet in my class named Martin, and we were all shocked one morning when we got up and Martin had just found out his father had been killed inâ€•in Korea. So it was a very personal war, â€™cause also, the Army was so small that we tended to know a lot more people in those days.

Interviewer:

What did you do after graduation?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, after graduation, I started outâ€•I was an armor officer, I chose Armor. I mentioned wanting to be a pilot, and yes, I always planned to go into the Air Corpsâ€•or the Air Force, by that timeâ€•like my father had. And much to my shock and surprise, I flunked the eye exam to go in the Air Force, and I wasâ€•I didnâ€™t know where to go. And so I went to a class, and I told the instructorâ€•it was a tactics classâ€•about that, and his name was Hollingsworth. Iâ€™ve forgotten whether he was a Major or a Lieutenant Colonel, but Hollingsworth later on became very, I guess, well-known.

He was a Texas A&M graduate, football player, but he was here asâ€•as a TAC, and teaching tactics, so. But he was the chief armor officer here, so he talked me into going armor, and he was the kind of guy you always did what he said. So anywayâ€•but Iâ€•but I never regretted the decision, because Iâ€•I enjoyed my time as an armor officer.

MG N. Creighton:

But I started out in the 82nd Airborne Division. Didnâ€™t stay there very long, because I was almost immediately sent back to Fort Knox to pick up what we called a packet platoon, which is an idea that didnâ€™t last long in the Army where you would go train your platoon and take it to Europe or Korea or something like that. And you would stay with it, so it would be a unit, but it did not work out because when we got to Europe, people hadnâ€™t told the personnel people over there that this is the plan, I guessâ€•I donâ€™t knowâ€•because they sent us all every which way. And I stayedâ€•I went to the Sixth Cavalry Regiment over there, and it was a wonderful assignment. This was now the Cold Warâ€™s on. The Sixth Cavalry was onâ€•

Interviewer:

This wouldâ€™ve been 1955-56.

MG N. Creighton:

No, this is 1954. In â€™54, I became Platoon Leader in the Third Battalion of the Sixth Armored Cavalry, and our job was to patrol the Iron Curtain up on the Czech border. And it was kind of a very interesting assignment. Now, the Russians were on the other side, and we had some contact with themâ€•not very much. But for a young Lieutenant, it was, you know, it was great training, as a matter of fact. And we would spend about one or two months up there, and then we would come back toâ€•toâ€•to base camp and do our training back there.

MG N. Creighton:

But I stayed there for three years, and by the time I left, Iâ€•Iâ€•I was a Company Commander, and we came back as a unit in another experiment the Army had, called â€œGyroscope.â€ And so we Gyroscoped home as a unit, and stayed together, so now for a year and a half I remained at Fort Knox.

Interviewer:

Soâ€•soâ€•so basically, you were with the same men forâ€•

MG N. Creighton:

For five years, almost—almost five years. By the time I had gotten there, I think I know—or I mean to that point in my career, I commanded a company longer than anybody else around in our—in our battalion. But it—but it made great friends, and it was great training, and it served me well, because I was with troops for five years.

Interviewer:

And that's something that the Army has recently gotten back to, the idea of—

MG N. Creighton:

They have, only they're doing a better job than—than what—than we did. When I look at the Army today, I—I wonder why we didn't think of the things and do it the way they're doing it.

Interviewer:

What was it like living, being in Germany at that point? Living as an Army Officer and—

MG N. Creighton:

Well, for the first year or so, we were—it was the Occupation, and the—I guess the best part of the Occupation was the Germans couldn't arrest you, so—but fortunately, I hope I didn't do anything to get arrested. But anyway, it did change when Germany—

Interviewer:

The civilian government was restored.

MG N. Creighton:

The civilian government was restored, and the Occupation ended. We could get speeding tickets, we could get other kind of tickets. And being a Company Commander and actually, some of my troops did get involved in—fortunately, nothing major. But they did get involved with the German police—and that was quite a period. But Germany was still devastated in the early 1950s—even the mid-50s—by the destruction from the war.

Interviewer:

And that was visible everywhere you went.

MG N. Creighton:

It was visible everywhere. I was—our main town where our—our barracks were, was Regensburg, Germany, which is a beautiful town. And—but they hadn't—there was a bridge across the—the—the Danube there—

Interviewer:

Was that—that was the—was that the famous bridge, wasn't it?

MG N. Creighton:

Yeah, that's a famous bridge, yeah. And it hadn't been repaired, and actually wasn't repaired until the late 1950s, and the town had the Messerschmitt Factory, which, if you know the Air Force history, that it was destroyed in the combination raids with Schweinfurt and Regensburg, which, incidentally, were the Eighth Air Force's biggest losses of the war. And so it's fairly famous, but digressing a little bit, by that time, my father was the Headquarters Commandant at the Eighth Air Force, so it's something that when I got over there, I was very interested to see.

But the Messerschmitt Factory, even by 1955-56, was still flat, bombed out.

Interviewer:

So when—when did you first get the inkling that Vietnam would play a significant role in your military career? When did you first start hearing about the situation in Vietnam?

MG N. Creighton:

Well—

Interviewer:

When you became aware of it?

MG N. Creighton:

After—after my time in the Sixth Cavalry, and just as I left the Sixth Cavalry, I got married, and I went on my honeymoon, and—

Interviewer:

This would've been around what year?

MG N. Creighton:

This was 1958. I went on my honeymoon, and I came back, because I was going to go to the Armor Advanced Class at Fort Knox. And so I stopped by Washington to see where I was going to go after that, and a guy looked through all these things, he said, "Well, they the Foreign Language Department at the Military Academy has your name on the list, and they want to send you to Spain." And so it turns out it's a longer story, and so we did, after the advanced class, we went to Spain. And then I came back to the faculty at West Point, and now it's 1960, and '60-'61. John Kennedy was, went and ran for President, and he was elected. That's when we started to hear on the faculty about Vietnam.

Interviewer:

On the faculty of

MG N. Creighton:

Of here, of West Point.

Interviewer:

You're back here.

MG N. Creighton:

I'm back here, and I'm teaching Spanish in the faculty. And some of the cadets and some of the officers thought, "Gee, we're probably going to go to war over there," and I got to tell you, I wasn't one of them who was perceptive enough to do that, because it seemed to me that was the wrong place to go fight battles. And I was still European-oriented, and to me, that was the Army, and I couldn't see us fighting over in Vietnam. But it began to grow in the 1960s, and by the time I left in '63, it was becoming pretty evident that—and of course, John Kennedy was killed in '63, in November of '63.

MG N. Creighton:

And it became evident that this was going to be something much larger than we thought it was going to be. And of course—and it was a completely different focus than what we all knew from Europe or Korea. But I wasn't perceptive enough to see where it was going, but I've got to say by the time I left, you knew that our focus was changing towards Vietnam. And our Superintendent while I was here the whole time was General William Westmoreland, and of course he ended up there. And by those times, we had senior officers and everybody else in Vietnam.

Interviewer:

So it was sort of looming by '63, it was starting to loom in everybody's consciousness.

MG N. Creighton:

That's right, it was. And I was somewhat chagrined because we were sent to my wife and I, we were sent to the Military Advisory Assistance Group. Not in Vietnam—we went to the Dominican Republic. And I thought I was way out of the way from

Interviewer:

Was this was it after the U.S. intervention in

MG N. Creighton:

Well, no, this is this was before, and this was at the fall of Trujillo and the Trujillo family, so it was very early on, and we went to the Dominican Republic in, oh, I guess in June of 1963. And we settled in down there at MAG, but it was after Trujillo, they'd had elections, and they elected a President named Juan Bosch. And my task, which was very interesting, was to go down there and help them start their military academy. And so what I ended up doing was taking a lot of the stuff from West Point, our classes, and then translated into Spanish. And for most of the time I was down there, I sat there and I wrote out a curriculum for the whole military academy. And I took the curriculum to my boss, who was a Dominican by the name of Colonel last Wessin, Wessin y Wessin. And he commanded the elite unit in the Dominican Army, but part of his unit was the military academy. And so when I gave him all this, he read it and he called me back in his office

and he said, "I was a Major. He said, "Very good, Major," he said, "but we won't be able to use this."

MG N. Creighton:

And I said, "Well, why not, Colonel?" He said, "Well, our cadets," he said, "we don't know whether we can trust them or not, and I'm afraid if we bring them in here, they'll all turn Communist." That's when Castro was had just sent some people over to help to try to invade the Dominican Republic. And so we never did start the military academy back up. But what happened was one night in September, I was told that there we were going to attend a party with the President of the Juan Bosch, and I was invited and so was my wife, and all the MAG Officers. Went to that party, which was at the Naval Club downtown in Santa Domingo, and I went in, and the air attaché came over.

MG N. Creighton:

And he said, "Major Creighton, the President would like to speak to you." And I turned to my wife, and I started to say, "Well, it must be very important if the President wants to speak to me." But it turns out when I went over to see the President, Juan Bosch, I actually mean it was small enough, now and then, when I'd come into the country, every MAG officer called on the President. It's not like going to a big country. And so I knew Bosch, and so Bosch said, "Major, did you go to work today at San Isidro?" That's the base where I worked, and I said, "Yes, I did, Mr. President." And he said, "Well," he said, "was anything unusual?"

I said, "No, nothing I can see unusual, Mr. President." And he said, "Well, were all the officers at work?"

MG N. Creighton:

I said, "Yes, sir, they were all at work." And he said, "Didn't you know it was a Dominican holiday?" And I said, "Unfortunately, Mr. President, I didn't know it was a Dominican holiday." And he said, "Were all the officers armed?" And I said, "Yes, sir, but they're always armed out there." And so he kind of looked at me, and thanked me, and so I went back and I told my wife about this conversation she says, "That's really strange." She said, "You know, I bet they're getting ready to overthrow him."

And I dismissed that, naturally, but it wasn't very long, because we were on the top floor of the Navy Club, and he went down to the first floor, and they were waiting down there and they arrested him, and by the time I got home, they had him on an airplane going to Puerto Rico.

Interviewer:

This was he was arrested how soon after this?

MG N. Creighton:

Right downstairs.

Interviewer:

You mean that evening it was that evening.

MG N. Creighton:

No, that evening, that soon. I'm glad I wasn't on the elevator with him. But anyway, so they broke relations with us or we broke them with them. Lyndon Johnson broke the relations, sent the Ambassador home, and I was never able to go to work again. I stayed down there about two and a half months longer, and unfortunately, I got sick and was evacuated out of there to Puerto Rico. And I eventually ended up on the staff in Panama.

Interviewer:

When did that when was the U.S. intervention, a few months after that?

MG N. Creighton:

It comes in 1965, and I'm involved in that also, but I didn't go to the Dominican Republic. By that time, I was still a Major on a Southern Command staff I was in the J-2

Area, which is the intel area, and I had a call at home. The 82nd hadâ€•well, first of allâ€•yeah, the 82nd had gone in, into Santa Domingo. And I wonâ€™t go through all the details, but there wasâ€•first of all, there was Colonel CaamaÃ±o on one side, who was considered the Leftist, and then there was Wessin y Wessin, on the other side, the Colonel whoâ€™s now the General.

MG N. Creighton:

And so they were still fighting in Santa Domingo when the 82nd went in, and the 82nd had been in there, oh, a few weeks, when I got a call at home one night. And I saidâ€•and it was the Chief of Staff, an Air Force two-star General, who called me back to the headquarters, and I went there and he was sitting around with a couple of other Generals. And they said, â€œWe understand you know General Wessin y Wessin.â€ I said, â€œYes, I do.â€ And I said, â€œHow did you know that?â€ They said, â€œWell, he has been not arrested, but taken into custody by the U.S. Forces, and theyâ€™re flying him out here tonight to Panama.

MG N. Creighton:

And they asked him, was there anybody, you know, he knew here or anything, and he mentioned your name.â€ So they said, â€œWould you beâ€•you know, we think you ought to go over and meet him.â€ So I went back and told my wife, and I got my uniform on and went out and stood at Howard Air Force Base, and here came the plane in, and here came Colonel Wessin y Wessin off the airplane. And he spots me, and I salute himâ€•General Wesson then, I saw. And thereâ€™s military police all over the place, because this is the big news in the country, and so the press in Panamaâ€™s gotten word about him being evacuated, and the guest he would be to Panama.

Interviewer:

What isâ€•is he in protective custody, or was he under arrest?

MG N. Creighton:

Wellâ€•

Interviewer:

Or was it hard to say?

MG N. Creighton:

Iâ€™till today, I donâ€™t know, really, but so anyway, what happens is heâ€™heâ€™first thing he did is he gave me his pistol, you know. I felt like, you know, so it was a surrender-type thing, and Iâ€™m sitting there, I donâ€™t know what to do with the pistol. So I turned around and I gave it to the nearest MP â€“ figured that was the smartest thing to do. But that was the dumbest thing to do, â€“cause I donâ€™t think they ever found the pistol. There was a big investigation later on. But anyway, so Wessin y Wessin and I went to the guest host at Fort Amador, which was Army headquarters in Panama, and we had the guest house.

MG N. Creighton:

And actually, by that time Iâ€™d been told my mission was to talk to General Wessin y Wessin into accepting the job as the Dominican Consulate General in Miami. And they would bring his family out, and everything would be fine, and so the Chief of Staff told me thatâ€™s what Washington wanted to do with General Wessin y Wessin. And so I did talk to General Wessonâ€•he didnâ€™t speak any English, but actually at that time my Spanish was probably better than my English. So heâ€™we had a long conversation and had a few drinks, and then we went to bed, but the next morning, when General Wessin y Wessin got off the plane, the only thing he had was his pistol.

MG N. Creighton:

And I said, â€œWell, where is your baggage?â€ He said, â€œI have no baggage.â€ And so I called the duty officer down to SOUTHCOM Headquarters, and they got back to me, and they said, â€œWe blocked off the PX for tomorrow morning between 9:00 and 10:00. Take General Wessin y Wessin down there and buy him everything he needs to go to Miami.â€ I said, â€œWhoâ€™s going to pay for it?â€ I said, â€œJust sign for it. Weâ€™ll take care of that later.â€ So weâ€™weâ€™we go down there, and theyâ€™ve got the place

all blocked off, and they're keeping the press away. So Wessin y Wessin and I go through the PX with the help of the PX Manager.

MG N. Creighton:

And if you've ever tried to think about what does everybody need, from toothbrush to underwear and everything. So we shopped for an hour, and they said, "You're going to have to get out because everybody's getting a big crowd outside." So we did that, and we got back to our place and found out that there was about 10 things we'd forgotten, but I couldn't go back, so I called my wife. And I gave her the list of 10 things, so she went down and got all 10 things and delivered them to us, and so General Wessin y Wessin got off that day, and I went home that night and I learned.

MG N. Creighton:

And actually, you know, I went back to the headquarters, and the Chief of Staff and the J-2 said, "We've got to have a report to Washington." And so I get the report up, and it was the J-2, I think it was a General he as a graduate Ken Skaer. And he said, "Look, you didn't mention anything about yourself in this thing." And I said, "Well, no, I didn't think to." He said, "I do think you ought to put something in there, I think." So I reluctantly followed the General's suggestion and sent it off, and I went home that night and AFM Panama came on, and they had General Wessin y Wessin getting off the airplane in Panama.

MG N. Creighton:

And denouncing the President of the United States, saying he wasn't going to accept the job, and all that kind of stuff. And my wife says, "You send that message, Neal?" I said, "Yes, I did." She said, "I hope you didn't put anything in about yourself." And I said, "Yes, I did." I said, "Well, maybe we'll get a job down here in Latin America somewhere." But anyway, that was my story about the Dominican Republic.

Interviewer:

Tell me about where were you when you received orders for Vietnam?

MG N. Creighton:

I was at Leavenworth. When we came back from Panama, we had an interesting time. We drove up the Inter-American Highway it took us a month which was a great trip, and we went to Leavenworth, and I was at Leavenworth, and the Branch said, "Where do you want to go," and I said, "I think I need to go to Vietnam." And the family by that time, I had three children and so everybody agreed, and so they agreed, and they sent me to Vietnam. And my wife said, "Well, what will you do in Vietnam?"

MG N. Creighton:

And I said, "Well, I haven't been for many years I haven't been with troops. I've only had that five years, and I've had all the time at the Academy, the Dominican Republic, and here in Panama, and now Leavenworth. They'll probably stick me at MACV or something like that." So I was packing for Vietnam, and my wife said, "Are you going to take your tennis racket?" And I said, "Well, I think you can play if you're in Saigon," so I took my tennis racket with me to Vietnam, and still thinking I was going to go to MACV. And I got off the airplane actually, I flew over with two other classmates, and we all sat there together.

MG N. Creighton:

And we got off at Tan Son Nhut, and went to the quarters at the replacement company. I forgot the replacement company I used to know the number which was there in Bien Hoa. And they told us our orders there, and Mike Cousland, one of my good friends, went off to the staff, and the other guy went to the 25th Division. And they got around to my orders, and they said, "You're going to the 11th Armored Cavalry." And I said, "My gosh, that's great, but I'll probably be the first guy that reported in with a tennis racket." So anyway, I did go to the 11th Armored Cavalry when I got over there.

Interviewer:

And where was the 11th?

MG N. Creighton:

The 11th Armored Cavalry was northeast of Saigon in the III Corps area, near a town called Xuan Loc, and the base camp and the 11th had only been there not quite a year. They were building their camp, and they got fairly far along with it. And so that was the area where they were operating. The Australians were to our south at that time. And like I say, the regiment had come over almost a year before that. It was commanded at that time by a guy named Roy W. Farley, class of 1945. And I reported in to Colonel Farley, and he said, "Well, Creighton," he said, "I don't know you and you don't know me."

MG N. Creighton:

I said something about, "Well, I know, sir. I was wondering how did I get here?" And he said, "I'll tell you how you got here." He said, "There's a guy named Bill Code, who's my S-3 right now, and Bill Code was in the Sixth Cavalry with you, and I sent him down about a month ago to see who had cav experience, and who was coming in as a Lieutenant Colonel, and he recommended you." So I basically owed my job to Bill Code. But Farley talked to me about his philosophy, and he was a wonderful guy, and turned out to be a great friend. And he said, "You know, I haven't been with troops for a long time, so I don't know a lot of the people coming along."

MG N. Creighton:

But he said, "So in order to improve my chances, I try to take in particular the senior level career officers who are either distinguished graduates out of ROTC or West Pointers." And what I found was an organization that was chock-full of West Pointers. Farley was a West Pointer, the class of '45. The number two guy was John McArdle, the Executive Officer, and he was the class of '49. Now, the main elements of the regiment were the three cavalry squadrons, which had, with their attachments, well over 1,000 people. Anyway.

Interviewer:

How many were there? what were there? tanks and APCs, basically?

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, we were the only armored—we were the largest armored unit in Vietnam at that time, and actually the whole time they were there, they were the largest armored unit. They were an armored cavalry regiment, but they had configured for fighting in Vietnam. And we—well, let me get, let me finish the personnel thing first. So I had gotten the first two who were West Pointers.

MG N. Creighton:

So now you go over to the First Squadron, and that was commanded by Jim Holt, class of 1949. And then you go to the Second Squadron, that was Garland McSpadden, class of '48, and you'd go to the Third and last Squadron, and that's Hill Dickinson, class of '49.

MG N. Creighton:

And then the only other Lieutenant Colonel in the regiment was the S-3, 'cause they'd upgraded that because the regiment was so much larger, and of course, now it's the S-3. So every one of the senior officers were West Pointers, which is extremely unusual. And as I went down the line, like, well, the S-2 was a guy named Gerry Schurtz, and Gerry, let's see—he—I forget Gerry's class, but—oh, yeah, he's class of '58. And so Gerry is on staff as the principal staff officer. But it was just loaded with West Pointers. As we go along, I'll talk about some of the others.

Interviewer:

And—and what was—what was the mission of the 11th Cav in this—in the first three four—

MG N. Creighton:

Well, the mission was—well—

Interviewer:

Was itâ€•

MG N. Creighton:

They were searching for a mission, to be quite frank. Theyâ€™d only been there for about a year, and most of the year, they didnâ€™t have anyâ€•any big battles, and Vietnam was heavily jungled. And so when they started to use them, with their tanks and things like that, to penetrate the jungles and get at the VC, whereas the infantry people could get there, but they couldnâ€™t do much when they got there to the base camps and all that kind of thing. And tanks could kind of tear them up. I never thought much of that mission after I learned about fighting over there, but thatâ€™s basically what they were doing.

The other thing they were doing is they were opening up the roads, and I thought that was a good mission for them, even though it wasnâ€™t dynamic or whatever it is.

Interviewer:

Basically convoy duty, then.

MG N. Creighton:

Convoy duty, protecting the convoys, going ahead, protecting the Rome plows, which were the big tractors which would plow down the side of the roads and all this kind of stuff. And that wasnâ€™tâ€• all these dashing cavalry officers didnâ€™t like that at all. They wanted to go out and bust shoe and get at the VC. So they were doing all that, and as we go along, you could see, as the second generation. The other problem was they came over there as a unit, so they didnâ€™t want the whole unit just to walk out the door one day, and so they had tried to switch people around and get other people in like that.

MG N. Creighton:

And so one of the main problems is that when I got there and for about two and a half weeks laterâ€•and I had a very large S-3 shopâ€•Iâ€™d been there longer than any one of my officers. So when you would go into the TOC, which was the Command Center, and somebody would call you down to the Command Center, everybodyâ€™s running for the SOIs to see who it is thatâ€™s calling. So it wasâ€•it was quite a learning experience, and we tried to overcome that with the next generation by moving people around.

Interviewer:

Didâ€•you saidâ€•so the first six months, you didnâ€™t see muchâ€•the unit didnâ€™t see much combat.

MG N. Creighton:

No. Matter of fact, when I got there, of course, theyâ€•they gave me a briefing, and theyâ€•â€™cause I was going to be a three, they gave me a special briefing. And one of the things they briefed me on, they said, â€œWe have not had a helicopter shot down in our whole time over here. Weâ€™ve had some crashes, but not helicopters.â€ And about two days laterâ€•they were still briefing meâ€•and all of a sudden, weâ€™re listening to the radio at the TOC, and thereâ€™s a mayday from a helicopter, saying that heâ€™s taking fire and heâ€™s going down.

MG N. Creighton:

And then we listenedâ€•about 15 seconds, 20 seconds later, thereâ€™s another helicopter going down. It turns out the Third Squadron was moving north toâ€•just to kind of demonstrate to the VC that we could go all the way up towards North Vietnamâ€•and they had been ambushed. And so Code, who was still the S-3, took me, and we got in his helicopter, an OH23, which carried only three people at that time, which was one too many, I was to learn over there. But anyway, we went out to the ambush site, and the firing had kind of died down when we got to the ambush site, and so Iâ€™m just listening on the radio, and Code tells the pilot to go in.

MG N. Creighton:

So we go in, and no sooner do we get into the ambush site than they start back up, so we canâ€™t take off. But actually, coming down the road was the relief column, which was also from the squadron. And the relief column was commanded by Captain Bill Boice, class

of 1963â€•captain of the baseball teamâ€•and I knew him because he wasâ€•he was the nephew of one of my classmates. And I also knew him when he was on the baseball team and I was on the faculty. Anyway, Bill in counter, he damn near took us all out with the fire they were firing. They were firing at the enemy, but of course it was coming into our position, too.

MG N. Creighton:

So they came in and I had a reunion with Bill Boice, but it was a very short reunion because he had a lot of things to do. But the sad part about it wasâ€•and the fighting stopped pretty much after thatâ€•we had 14 U.S. KIA on the ground, and we had to getâ€•we really wanted to get them out of there. And I remember General Morgan Roseborough from the Ninth Division came over and landed, and then he and I talked about how to get them out. So Bill was busy doing other things â€™cause he was still the three, so my taskâ€•well, my first task in a battle in Vietnam, after ducking, you know, was to get the 14 evacuated. And the company commander was among the killed, and thatâ€™s the reason the boys came inâ€•and he came in. And this was the squadron I was later on to take over. He came in and took over commandâ€•was still in command of the squadronâ€•I mean still in command of the troopâ€•it was K Troopâ€•when I became the squadron commander.

MG N. Creighton:

But going back to your organizations, before we forget that, the regiment was composed of three squadronsâ€•the squadrons had three armored cavalry troops, which wereâ€•were basically I mean called ACAVs, and they were converted to M113s with machine guns on either side, with a 50 up front and two 30-caliber. And one 30-caliber in each side, and thenâ€•and they had some more armor protection in the front, but not enough. And then you had a tank company, with 17 tanks, and our tanks were M48A3s when I first started out, diesel tanks, over there, with a 105 gun.

MG N. Creighton:

Then we had an artillery battery with six 155 Howitzers, soâ€•and then we had our own air section. The regiment had an engineer company, which they split up among the squadrons. And so it wasâ€•and then we had other people, intel people and stuff, that would go with us all along. So when youâ€™re traveling, youâ€™ve got 1,100 people, so itâ€™s a sizeable outfit. A lot of firepower, and thatâ€™s what reallyâ€•that was ourâ€•our reason for being there, because of the firepower.

Interviewer:

Yeah, you said it was a unit in search of a mission forâ€•

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, and the mission was to come up in January with Tet, â€™cause everything changed at Tet. But weâ€•I donâ€™t want to skip over all the rest of the stuff that happened before that.

Interviewer:

Were you optimistic about the course of the war when you first arrived?

MG N. Creighton:

When I first arrived, I was curious, I would say, â€™cause Iâ€™d never fought that kind of war. Leavenworth, I think, did a goodâ€•they certainly did a good job of preparing me to be the operations officer and the plans officer, â€™cause that was my job over there, and it was all fresh in my mind. And I found out that what they taught me at Leavenworth actually worked. I mean when theyâ€•they said, â€œThis is how long the convoy takes to pass this point,â€ and all this kind of thing, â€™cause we did all that, it wasâ€•they wereâ€•they were great. And so Iâ€•I trusted what they had taught me. Fortunately, I had also been in a three shop when I had been down at the squadron level with the Sixth Cavalry, so Iâ€™d done a lot of that before, but not nearly with the confidence that I did after Leavenworth. So I thought an awful lot of the Army school system on that.

Interviewer:

What was the greatest challenge as theâ€•as theâ€•as the operations officer? What was

your greatest challenge during that firstâ€•before Tet?

MG N. Creighton:

One of your greatest challenges was Vietnam was a different kind of war. There was no front line, and you did not planâ€•Vietnam, if you were the three, or the commander, and you want to plan an operationâ€•particularly with a large outfit like we had, and we worked with almost every division in southern Vietnam over thereâ€•you had to coordinate with all the U.S. units. You had to coordinate with all the province command, all the province chiefs, Vietnamese. You had to coordinate with all the Vietnamese Army.

MG N. Creighton:

And so the greatest problem, challenge, I really had was if I said, â€œLook, weâ€™re going to go over here and have a operation,â€ I would have to go to the ARVN Division, which was in Xuan Loc. And then I would have to go to the Aussies on the south, and Iâ€™d have to go to the province chiefs. And then the rule wasâ€•which was a good rule, but most of the time, when youâ€™re in World War II or something like that, you figure your scheme of maneuver first. What we figured isâ€•well, we talked about where we would go, but you couldnâ€™t really go off the roads, so that wasnâ€™t a tough problem.

MG N. Creighton:

The problem was you had to be under cover of artillery fire wherever you were so they could almost immediately get fire in to support you. So the first thing we did, after we decided where we were going to go, was do our artillery planning, which is backwards from the normal kind of planning you did. But it turned outâ€•I mean I thought that was a good idea after I found out the reason for the thing. So I guess as the three, the main thing that I had to do was do the coordination. And then, because I had a big three shop, whenever a squadron was in contact, I would get in my helicopter and go out to see.

MG N. Creighton:

And particularly to contact the squadron commander and say, â€œWhat can we do for you? What do you need?â€ Because we had all the assets, and under me, actually, as a three, was our Thunderhorse, which was our helicopter company, and theyâ€•theyâ€•they had the gunships which were always needed, and you had to use them. We also had the TACs, the Air Force guys were Tactical Air and things like that. So my main thing was not to fight the battle, because the battle was fought by the squadron commanderâ€•was just to see how we could get things to them.

MG N. Creighton:

Supply was a big thing. You had toâ€•and â€™cause you were tied up on the roads and you had to protect the roads. So I spent most of my time on those things, and I spent a tremendous amount of time in my own helicopter, and I went down about three times. Oh, and that, one of them isâ€•

Interviewer:

You were shot down.

MG N. Creighton:

One of them I was shot down. The others were mechanical failures, and the first one I went down on, I had three people in the helicopter. I had my Sergeant Major with me, and the pilot, and when we had the mechanical failure, fortunately we were over I think it was Highway 13. And you could look downâ€•and Vietnam in those days, there was a village here and a village there, and in between there was nothing. Because they had these armed villages, soâ€•but the villages were protected by local forces.

MG N. Creighton:

And they had their little forts and things out on theâ€•and so the first time we went down, it was a mechanical failure, and we were in radio contact. So we told our headquarters what was happening, but he didnâ€™t have enough control. We went in right by this little fort, and I looked out and we were in the middle of a minefield. So anyway, we had to get out and pick our way through the minefield. And also, what I found out by working with the air cav troop was on H23s, because of the hot temperatures we had in Vietnam, and because

of the amount of dust we always kicked up, you really didn't want to fly three people in those little H23s.

MG N. Creighton:

And so I made the rule that we wouldn't do that anymore, and we never did. The second time that we went down, we actually went down near Xuan Loc, but we started out and went over the jungle, and the engine kicked off, and we just went down, and it all of a sudden kicked back up. Well, we went about 10 or 15 or 20 clicks, kept going up and down, and fortunately finally came down to rest, it was right by the Vietnamese airfield, friendly airfield in Xuan Loc. The third time was the bad time. Regiment was out on Highway One, which was the main north-south highway.

Interviewer:

When was the third time? What was it during?

MG N. Creighton:

The third time was just before Thanksgiving. It had been a three for quite some time—in 1967, and it was just my pilot and myself, and we were going back out from Blackhorse Base Camp to the regimental CP, which was fairly far up on Highway One, and so we took a shortcut across this very thick canopy jungle along that. And while we were flying along and I was talking to a guy—it turned out it was a major that had been at Leavenworth with me—at one of our—our relay camps on top of a hill, and—which was our responsibility to defend, and I was talking about what we were going to do for them.

MG N. Creighton:

When I looked out to my right and I saw some tracers going up, which surprised me, and the next thing I knew, there was a big, huge whang right above my head, and the chopper started down. And I didn't say anything to the pilot, but I knew what was going on, because they'd obviously hit us, and it hit up above where the power was on the thing and just—and just cut out. So he's flying it, and I'm talking to the guy, trying to tell him where we're going down. And it's triple-canopy jungle, and it's pretty far away from everything, so we went down, and the pilot—who was about 19 years old—warrant officer—right, we were about 60 to 80 feet above the ground, just above the trees.

MG N. Creighton:

And he did—he did an auto-rotation—an auto-rotation, stopped the little 23, and then when he stopped it, we sat there for a second, and kuuk, went about 60 to 80 feet down, right through the triple-canopy jungle. And I didn't know if the major had gotten my message or anything when we went down, and I ended up from 1,500 feet on the ground, on my side—it was a big bubble, but the bubble wasn't there by the time the chopper got all the way down. It was smashed. And the pilot's laying on the other side of me, but he's all right, and I'm all right. So we had to climb out of the chopper, and we were in the middle of the jungle, and so I took—I took the SOIs, anything classified I took with me. The chopper didn't burn.

Interviewer:

The SOI? What's that?

MG N. Creighton:

That's your—your SOI is all your channels. That's all your intelligence information if you want to call people, and it's your communications bible. So we took that, and then just before we left, we went back to the helicopter and got, oh, four, five, or six flares, which we used, and they were all red flares, which we used from the helicopters to mark the enemy below us to bring in the gunships. And I took those with me. And we started to go out, and I was headed for Highway One, because I figured if I got over there I might be able to find somebody, but it was quite a ways away. First thing that happened, we came to a clearing.

MG N. Creighton:

And I looked around, and we were in the middle of the biggest VC base camp I ever saw in my life. And I thought, "Man, this is not very good." But fortunately, there weren't

any VC around, so we start trudging along and trying to get away from that place, and then I heard helicopters in the distance. And so I started throwing my flares, and one of them headed towards us. And then I threw another flare, and then he came over, he kind of went above us and everything, and then he went over, and I heard him idling, you know, over very close to land or something.

MG N. Creighton:

And he was up, and I thought to myself, "bet he must be trying to tell us something," because you wouldn't do that. So I told the pilot to come with me and we went over there, and lo and behold, right in the middle of the jungle is this swamp. And there across the swamp, which was kind of like a lake, was the helicopter. And I could see the people in the helicopter—I couldn't see who they were—but there was the helicopter. So I threw my last grenade—I mean flare—and they saw us. And they started over—they couldn't get in, and so I said to the pilot, "Come on, let's go out and meet them."

MG N. Creighton:

So we got about three steps into the water, and the pilot says, "Colonel," he said, "can't swim," and I thought, "Oh, boy." So I went back and thought about the lifesaving classes we had here at West Point, so I hauled the pilot on my back, and we went out and I pulled him out to the chopper, and out of the chopper jumps the regimental Sergeant Major and one of the gunners. And so we pushed the pilot into the chopper, and they're hovering, you know, right above this swamp. And so then I went in there next, and then they got back in. Well, the pilot tries to take off, and he can't make it out of there. There's not enough room.

MG N. Creighton:

Now we've got too much weight in there. So the Sergeant Major—bless his soul—jumped back into that damn swamp, while we—they flew us out. And they flew us out—cause they want to get back to him right away—to Highway One and dumped the two of us on the Highway One, and went back and got the Sergeant Major. And it all worked out and they came. But we went back to—they took us back to base camp.

Interviewer:

How long were you actually on the ground for?

MG N. Creighton:

Oh, maybe a little bit over an hour, maybe. It was—fortunately, it was not much longer than that. But anyway, we went back to base camp, and I happened to look down, and all over me were leeches. I mean there must've been 100 leeches on me. So I went into the shower at base camp and took all the leeches off, and so did the pilot and the Sergeant Major. And I told the pilot when he got ready to go, I said, "Get another chopper and let's go back out. We got to be there for the night briefing." And he said, "You know, Colonel," he said, "I really don't want to fly anymore." He said, "I got about a week and a half before I go back home." And I said, "Well, I tell you what, son, you know, I think you saved our lives today, so I'll get somebody else." So I got a Captain to fly me back out—that's the last time I ever—ever saw that guy, but he saved my life by that auto-rotation. But that was quite an interesting experience.

Interviewer:

Did you—did you think you were going to make it out when you—when you initially—

MG N. Creighton:

You know—

Interviewer:

Auto-rotated into the jungle?

MG N. Creighton:

You know, you don't really think any about it—you think, "What am I going to do next?" And there wasn't anything I could do but sit there except talk to the guy and try to tell him as best as I could where it was, and it obviously worked. And then we hit the

ground, and then I said "well, by the time we got onto the ground, it was the pilot—he was the key guy till we got on the ground, and then it was basically turned over to me. And unfortunately, I had left my CAR-15 back at regimental headquarters. So all I had was my pistol with me at that time, so I wasn't very well-armed. But you thought—you start thinking out, "Okay, what am I going to do next? How am I going to get out of here," and that occupies your thought. You don't think, "Oh my God, I'm going to get killed" or anything.

Interviewer:

Once again, it's training.

MG N. Creighton:

It's training, and that's when I heard that chopper over, doing that strange thing over there, and that's one reason I said, "Hey, let's go there," on the thing. However, I mean I've thought about that for many years. When you drop 1,500 feet straight down, it can be a pretty exciting time.

Interviewer:

Putting it mildly. Can we—can we—can we start to talk about—move up to Tet?

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, let's do.

Interviewer:

Tell me how did you learn about the Tet offensive? Where—where—where were you when Tet broke out?

MG N. Creighton:

Okay. When Tet—by the time Tet broke out, I was now commanding—I'd taken over from Hill Dickinson, who was a very good squadron commander. That's been my problem over the years. I don't take over these outfits which you can build back. I always take over the best outfit, and you can't go anywhere but down. But anyway—but I was commanding the Third Squadron. Farley had promised me when I came in that after six months he would give me the—give me a squadron of my choice, and I chose the Third Squadron.

MG N. Creighton:

Farley had left, and a guy named Jack McFarlane was commanding the regiment. So I had taken over the regiment on 5 January of 1968. We were up at Loc Ninh, near An Loc on the Cambodian border, and the regiment—I was detached from the regiment. I was attached to the First Infantry Division, the Second Brigade of the First Infantry Division, and under their command, and I was operating in that area. I had—when I took over, we had gone west over towards the Fishhook—we went back into the jungle and went to Special Forces camps, and we cleared roads out to there—didn't have much contact.

MG N. Creighton:

And that's when I got my—my aversion to going into the jungle, "cause I found out what was happening, "cause I took my whole squadron in there. I didn't take any—any—any wheels. I just took tracks, because you couldn't really take the wheels in there. The roads were all mined, and so thank gosh for the Rome plows, because they had plowed the side of the place so I could take my tracks off the roads and get in. But when I went after the enemy, I'd take the tanks in. But you don't surprise the VC when you're taking the tank. You're crushing things—you're making a lot of noise, so they knew you're coming. And they're not dumb, and so they'd get the hunter kivo teams out, and they'd fire at you. Well, you fire back, and you may kill one or two of them.

Interviewer:

What were they firing at you with?

MG N. Creighton:

They were firing with you with RPG-9s, basically, which could penetrate—not the front, but they could penetrate the other places on the M48 tanks. And we'd end up getting a tank disabled and maybe one or two people killed, and we might've killed one or two

people of them. Thatâ€™s not a pretty good exchange, â€™cause then you got to drag the tank out of there, you got toâ€”and it put more people at risk. And Iâ€™d lostâ€”I had about 10â€”Iâ€™d been in the area. This is just before Tet. Iâ€™d been out there for a couple of weeks, and I had lost about, oh, I thinkâ€”not lost, but I had damaged.

MG N. Creighton:

None of them actuallyâ€”we could put all of them back inâ€”but 10 ACAVsâ€”that wasâ€”and thatâ€™s an awful lot of vehicles to lose. And who flies in to see me but the new gentleman whoâ€™s going to take over command from Westmoreland when he leaves, but General Creighton Abrams. But fortunately for meâ€”actually, I did get along well with General Westmoreland and liked him very much, but I didnâ€™t know Abrams all that well. And Abrams came in, and I sat down and told him about my tanks, and we hadâ€”thatâ€™s when I really learned to like him and see what an intelligent fellow he was, â€™cause we talked about my 10 ACAVs and what you could do about it. And I told him about my own aversion to taking these things into the jungle, and we reallyâ€”I felt better when General Abrams left, and, you knowâ€”

Interviewer:

Whatâ€™d he tell you?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, heâ€”basically, what heâ€™d listen and he tended to agree with me, about not bouncing over there. And I donâ€™t think at that pointâ€”he was new over thereâ€”he had thought about our losses over there, so I think heâ€”he kind of reassured me that he agreed with me and would keep this in mind. So anyway, then we went back, and now itâ€™s Tet, and Tet was supposed to be a stand-down. I donâ€™t know who at the higher level said, had negotiated this so-called stand-down, but I guess it was the government levels.

MG N. Creighton:

And on theâ€”I think it was the 30th of January of 1968, our mission wasâ€”and I was attached to a section with a guy named Buck Newman. I think he was a West Pointer, but I donâ€™t know what class. He was commanding the brigade and was a Colonel in the First Infantry Division. And then heâ€”we were told that we couldnâ€™t even patrol. We were going to have a two or three-day stand-down.

Interviewer:

Just to refer back, though, to your problems with the jungle and taking the tank, your aversion to taking the tanks into the jungleâ€”

MG N. Creighton:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Did youâ€”at that point, did you start to question the overall strategy of the war or anything like that?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, Iâ€”you know, when youâ€™re a Lieutenant Colonel down at that level, and youâ€™re working, you know, 14-15 hours a day, and youâ€™ve got some very serious problemsâ€”youâ€™ve got people being killed and things like thatâ€”you really donâ€™t have time to strategize. You strategize or you tactically figure out how you can do it better, but I neverâ€”however, very soon after that, I began to change my mind, because the mission changed. The terrain changed, and the results changed. And soâ€”

Interviewer:

After Tet, you mean.

MG N. Creighton:

Yeah, and Iâ€”and we can talk about that.

Interviewer:

Okay.

MG N. Creighton:

So anyway, at campâ€•regimentâ€•the other two squadrons were down with the First Division also, but they were down near Lai Khe, which was south of us. And then we were up on the Cambodian border, at Loc Ninh, north of An Loc, where the Brigade was. And so our mission was to stand down. Wellâ€•so we did. We stood down. The 30th came, and we stood down. And then about halfway throughâ€•no, it was the late morning of the 30thâ€•I got a phone call to go report to Colonel Newman.

MG N. Creighton:

So I got in my chopper and went to see Colonel Newman at An Loc, and he saidâ€•he said, â€œThe VC have broken the truce. Our mission is to start back with offensive operations immediately.â€ And as I just explained, you know, to you, when you say what was your toughest job when you were the three, you got to coordinate it. You canâ€™t say, â€œIâ€™m going to go over there,â€ because the ARVN may be over there, and thereâ€™s ARVN troops all around you. * {:.time} 1:00:40

MG N. Creighton:

Thereâ€™s reasonable forces, everything, they may be chasing somebody, or they may even have target practice, or they may be firing H&Is in there at nighttime on the thing, so you had to coordinate it. So I said, you know, â€œColonel Newman, thereâ€™s not much we can do besidesâ€•Iâ€™m not even sure how far I could send out a patrol. I donâ€™t think I can do that to the guys.â€ And he said, â€œWell, youâ€™re probably right.â€ So he got another battalion commander and myself togetherâ€•an infantry battalion commander, and his name was Mort Oâ€™Connor, and he was a classmate, and Mort had about six kids, and heâ€™d been a good friend for years. And so they gave us the mission of going into a certain area between An Loc and Loc Ninh where they thought they knew some of the enemy was.

MG N. Creighton:

And the plan was that we would get up and send forces early in the morning, armored forces, to secure a landing zone, and theyâ€™d all come in with helicopters. And then weâ€™d go out and chase them through theâ€•through the jungle and clear the area. So we didnâ€™t start any offensive operations until 31 January, 1968. I went out and got up early that morning, and went to my TOC, and some of my troops had already been out on the way to the LZs to secure them, and they were reporting that there were roadblocks all up and down Highway 13, â€•cause you had to go downâ€•which was the main road out there.

Which I thought was strange, particularly because the roadblocks werenâ€™t covered by fire or anything.

Interviewer:

These are Vietcong roadblocks.

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, thatâ€™s right, but they werenâ€™t covered by fire, and so we were pushing them away and they werenâ€™t mined. They just put them out there just to block traffic going south. And so anyway, they cleared them, and then I went out for myself and I looked at them. And then I was there when Mort brought his battalion, and I remember him landing, hopping out of the chopper, and these infantry guys would alwaysâ€•they had a lot of heavy stuff over there in Vietnam, too, they were carrying around. And Mort tripped right in front of me and boom, right on down.

MG N. Creighton:

He looked up and saw anything, I think, so. So weâ€™re out clearing it, and then I get a call from a guy named John Getgood, class of â€™60, whoâ€™s my S-3, who had worked for me at regiment and I brought him down. John said, â€œYou better get back right away because weâ€™ve been detached from the First Infantry Division.â€ And so I hadâ€•and then he said, â€œWeâ€™re supposed to withdraw,â€ and so I didnâ€™t want to leave Mort out there, so I called the First Infantry Division and we made provisions to get his battalion and the choppers to come in. And then we started moving back, and so I flew backâ€•

Interviewer:

Moving back to Loc Ninh.

MG N. Creighton:

Yeah, went back to where Getgood and my headquarters is, I think. But also with my headquarters are the trains from the 11th Armored Cavalry, which is my responsibility to protect them. And a guy named Major Lewis was commandingâ€•would be putting together a support battalion up there. So Getgood says, â€œOur orders are to move south as fast as we can towards Saigon.â€

Interviewer:

And Saigon was how far distant?

MG N. Creighton:

Saigon was about 100 Ks distance from us, I think, soâ€•â€™cause we were up on the Cambodian border. And I said, â€œWell, there must be more than that to the thing.â€ And I checked with the First Divisionâ€•they didnâ€™t have anything more. And weâ€™re now attached again to the regiment, and the regiment says theyâ€™re going to come out and theyâ€™re going to go south, too. So then myâ€•I couldnâ€™tâ€•I had to defend all those trains there, so I leftâ€•now, Bill Boice is still commanding K Troop, the baseball player I told you aboutâ€•and so I left Boice at Loc Ninh. I already had one of my troopsâ€•and a troop is like a company.

MG N. Creighton:

We call them â€œtroopsâ€ in the cavâ€•which was off with, I think, the 25th Division. And so I started with two troops, the Howitzer battery, all my own trains, and tank company, moving south, and I thought I was going to tag on the end of the regiment and follow them south, till I got the call from regiment that said, â€œWeâ€™re not going to make it over the highway.â€ That was 13, coming down. And they said, â€œYouâ€™re now the lead element.â€ And I thought, you know, â€œThatâ€™s pretty good. Iâ€™m the lead element and I donâ€™t know where Iâ€™m going.â€ So anyway, so I pulled in, and Getgood and I, weâ€™re in helicopters.

MG N. Creighton:

So we landed at Lai Khe, which was First Infantry Division Headquarters, to try to find out what was going on, but we landed right byâ€•I remember, by the Red Cross strip where they brought the casualties in. And no sooner had we landed and got out of the helicopters when just this hellacious mortarâ€•mortar attack started coming in. And so they mortared the place, and we ducked behind everything and got up and actually, Getgoodâ€™s chopper had some pretty serious damage, but his pilot said, â€œIâ€™m justâ€•not just staying here. Weâ€™re going in the air anyway.â€ And mine was pretty good.

Interviewer:

Were you surprised by theâ€•by both the scope of the offensive and the breadth of the aggressiveness?

MG N. Creighton:

Now now. Not yet, because I havenâ€™t seen anything except this mortar attack, and there was other things. So, anyway, Colonel McFarlane calls, and so he had a gathering south of Lai Khe with all his three commanders, and so we all gathered there, and McFarlane gave me my mission. And my mission was still being the lead, and to go to III Corps Headquarters, because it was under attack, and keep it from fallingâ€•from falling to the VC. And then I only had a couple of more problems. First of all, I absolutely had no idea where III Corps Headquarters was.

MG N. Creighton:

Iâ€™d never been there before. This is VC III Corps Headquarters, Third Vietnamese Corps. And neither did anybody else, except the Second Battalionâ€•Second Squadron Commander Gar McSpadden had been there once a while back, and he kind of gave me the general area, so I knew where to head. But McFarlane told me, he said, â€œDonâ€™t worry, theyâ€™ve made arrangements for one of the advisors to come out and meet your

column. Well, I could see this advisor, right, just trying to go through Bien Hoa in his jeep and getting shot, and then we wouldn't know where in the heck to go.

MG N. Creighton:

So I wasn't very optimistic about knowing where we were going. So, anyway, so I got in my helicopter and I said to Getgood, I said, "You take care of the column coming in. I'm going to find out what the situation is on how we ought to deploy and where we ought to go." So based on what Gar McSpadden had told me, I did find III Corps Headquarters, and I landed my chopper there just about dusk. The problems with those little H23 choppers was you couldn't they had no night capability, so there was no way I could go back and fly around the column.

MG N. Creighton:

And not long after I mean just before dusk, Getgood came in on the thing. But he came in with good news, because that advisor and his jeep actually did show up, and I was much relieved. But I went into III Corps Headquarters, and there were the Ninth Division, they had part of their cav squadron there at that time. But boy, those guys were just beat. They'd apparently been fighting all day, and they were just tired as heck, and so I was ushered in. I ran into General Frank Clay, and I had known General Clay when I was a cadet at West Point. He was a Brigadier General at that time, and he'd been my TOC at Camp Buckner.

MG N. Creighton:

And so and I always thought a lot of him, and he was a good guy, and he was the assistant division commander of the 101st Division. And he said, "We've been waiting for you," and so he said, "Come on, I want you to talk to General Barsanti. We've got to figure out what to do." And now when I got in there, there was the Vietnamese Third Corps Commander, also their three-star was in there. And so I talked to the three of them and told them what was coming in, and they at that point, they didn't talk much about what I was going to do, because now it's already night. They were just saying, "What are you going to do tomorrow," because they were pretty well encircled by the VC, and they didn't know what's going on around Bien Hoa, which is a pretty built-up area.

Interviewer:

Did you have any idea how many VC troops were surrounding you?

MG N. Creighton:

No.

Interviewer:

No intelligence.

MG N. Creighton:

No, I had no intelligence at all. And, you know, it never really worried me, and it's because we were firepower plus. I was never really afraid of getting overrun in Vietnam because we had such an advantage in firepower, and with our tracks and everything. So I mean the numbers didn't really bother me. It's where they were, what they were doing, what the civilian population doing, etc. And so they called over a battalion commander from the 101st, a guy named Colonel Dave Grange. And Grange and they said, "Okay, you guys figure out how first of all, let's clear all these people away from III Corps so we can get back to controlling the battle." And so Dave Grange and I sat down with their G-3 and staff and G-2, and figured out how we were going to clear out. About 10:00 that night, boy, there's here come, you could hear the tanks coming into town, and they thundered into right through Bien Hoa, which they'd probably never been before at least not in our time over there. And they threw the front gates open, even though the VC were firing at them from across the street, and the tanks rolled in.

MG N. Creighton:

And all the Vietnamese cause III Corps was a big headquarters they were out there cheering them as they came through the gate, and some people were given big air and all those kind of things, and it was like liberating Holland or something like that. And

the tanks roared in, the tanks roared and I'm out there watching them, and then they close the gate, and they said, "They're in." I said, "I think something's missing." I told Getgood that I said, "I think something's missing." And he said, "What that?" And I said, "How battery." And then that was our artillery battery. They had gotten off from the column. So I gave, I said, you know, "I got to go finish playing with Grange. You go find the artillery battery." So he took an ACAV, a platoon out, and they found the artillery battery and brought them back in.

Interviewer:

Was that self-propelled?

MG N. Creighton:

Self-propelled, yeah. So and they got all the artillery battery in there. So we're in there that night, and during the night, when we got in there, the V.I mean the Vietnamese, the friendlies, wanted us, because the guys were shooting at us, they wanted us to put the armor up on the perimeter. And I didn't think that was a good idea, because then you're just a target for the RPGs, and so I had to argue with the ARVN people. I said, "Look, I'll put them back here. If anything happens, then we'll react to the attack." So I thought then I finished my plan with Grange, and I was laying down there trying to get some sleep.

MG Creighton

And Getgood and I were in the same area by the track, and there was this and they started lobbing mortars in there and shooting in there. And I think they woke us up, but we didn't get up. We just laid there we were dead-tired. The next day, we did go. We went with Grange, and we cleared out all that area. And it was I was talking about in the jungle, where we'd been. That had been the only fighting we'd done. We never fought in city fighting before, and we did have some training in Europe over that and things like that, and back in the States we'd trained for that. And

Interviewer:

Describe who you're describe Bien Hoa a little bit for us.

MG N. Creighton:

Yeah, well, Bien Hoa was northeast of Saigon, and they had one of the two key airports. The two key airports were Tan Son Nhut, which is a little bit off to our west, and Bien Hoa, which was right there. And it was and it had two Field Forces headquarters, the U.S. headquarters for all that part of Vietnam, for South Vietnam, which General Weyand was commanding, and had the ARVN III Corps, and it was a fairly large suburb of Saigon. The streets were small. There weren't any real skyscrapers in Bien Hoa.

Interviewer:

What, two and three-story buildings?

MG N. Creighton:

Two and three-story buildings, and

Interviewer:

They'd be built by the French, I assume.

MG N. Creighton:

Well, the French and the Vietnamese. It was an older town, and some of them were the French tended to build, I guess, the more sturdy buildings, and the Vietnamese were built whatever they could, but and that was to our advantage. One thing the tanks here's another thing about where you fight with your tanks. The first year over there, and now I'm a half-year after that for a year and a half, they never fired anything but anti-personnel or anti-personnel rounds. Or beehive rounds, or one of the things like that, and or canister rounds, basically, is what we were firing then.

MG N. Creighton:

They didn't didn't they didn't fire shot, which with anti-personnel, there's nothing to shoot at on the thing. So our gunners really had for a year and a half, hadn't used their rangefinders. All they'd done is point and shoot the canister

at the enemy in the jungle, and that would blow the jungle away and they could move on. So we went in through town, and Grange's men—one thing in the armored, we didn't take that many casualties, quite frankly, because we were armored there, but there was usually infantry with us, and that's where the casualties came later on. At first it was the U.S., and then later on, it became the Vietnamese infantry.

MG N. Creighton:

But anyway, with Dave Grange's battalion out of the 101st, we were going through the city. And my people were out there kicking doors in and all this kind of stuff, but we were getting heavy fire. And the tank company commander, a wonderful officer by the name of Captain Don Robison, called me up, and he said, "Look, we're all getting shot up here and I'd like to use the tank guns on these buildings." And I said, "What are you going to fire at them?" He said, "Well, as close as we are I thought I'd start out by firing canister."

MG N. Creighton:

So I mean that was a big decision right in the middle of town. One of the things that I had been told by the Vietnamese corps commander was that they were going to have helicopters going through the city telling the civilians to get out, the fighting was coming. And actually, the helicopters were flying over, and they were making these announcements to the civilians in the city. So, now it's late afternoon, so I figured most of the civilians will be out of the city or at least they're forewarned. So I gave the order to fire. I didn't check with the 101st Division or anything like that—I figured this—I have to make this decision.

MG N. Creighton:

And Grange was taking some significant casualties, and I was taking some casualties, too. So Robison fires. He lines up about five tanks, drives down the street, and fires, and he fired into the first floor. Now, most of them are three and four stories high, and after he fired one or two—he fired one in there, and the house would go cloomp.

Interviewer:

Just pancake.

MG N. Creighton:

Pancake. And the next one, cloomp—pancake—and of course, all these snipers and the VC were on the third floor, and they had ammunition in the places, and the places were all going up in smoke. There's a book about this by William Keith Nolan, and in one chapter, he calls it "urban renewal." And that's about me telling the tanks to fire in the town, and so it was urban renewal. And I got to tell you, ten minutes later, nobody was shooting at III Corps Headquarters. The whole place was cleared out.

MG N. Creighton:

And when they got out, there wasn't really much place to go, because III Corps had blocked it with about two other battalions of their own ARVN forces. And so that was basically almost the end of the Battle of Bien Hoa. The other thing was, later on in the day, I was flying above it, and Robison, again, was down below me, and I started taking fire from a Buddhist temple. And it was fairly accurate fire, and it was kind of keeping me away from the fight or anything like that, and my pilot was getting a little perturbed. And Robison said, "Look, I can take that out easily."

And I thought it over and I said, "Well, firing at the people shooting at us across from III Corps and down the street from it is one thing, but firing at a Buddhist temple is another." So I told Robison not to fire.

Interviewer:

How long—so how long did your involvement in this battle in Bien Hoa actually—or your unit's involvement in this battle in Bien Hoa actually last?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, actually, you know, we started early in the morning clearing the city, and—but the battle, part of the battle I'm talking about was in the afternoon. It was the late afternoon, so we were actually fighting or kicking our way through Vietnam—not through Bien

Hoa, basically, the whole day. And it was late in the afternoon when I didn't fire at that, at the Buddhist temple. But that evening, I was—we went back, and I've forgotten where my CP was. He was somewhere in town, and I was there, and lo and behold, up comes this guy in civilian clothes, who turns out to be Colonel Wilson.

MG N. Creighton:

Now, Colonel Wilson, I knew who he was because I'd been a Lieutenant in the 82nd Airborne, and he was known at Fort Bragg as "Coal Bin Willie" Wilson, because I don't know what his job was. I think he was a brigade commander or something like that—but his great thing was because those were the days when the barracks all had, you know, the coal out front, and somebody had to stoke the stove and stuff like that. And he thought they had very bad-looking coal bins, and so Coal Bin Willie Wilson designed a way how you should keep your coal bin. So he became Coal Bin Willie Wilson, and he was the number two guy in CORDS in III Corps, where John Vann was the number one guy.

MG N. Creighton:

So he storms in in my CP and wants to know who is responsible for all that tank fire. And I said, "I am. I'm responsible, Colonel." I said, "I recognize you. You're Colonel Wilson." And he didn't recognize me, fortunately, but anyway, he—he really tore into me, and said, "Look, we at CORDS, you know, our job is to build up this country, and it's people like you coming in here, and you're destroying all these structures and tearing down the economy. It's going to take us years to build back up." And he said—and he used Vann's name. He said, you know, "Mr. Vann is really upset with you," and all this kind of things, and so I got a little bit upset with him. So I told him—

Interviewer:

What did CORDS stand for, the CORDS—

MG N. Creighton:

Gosh, well, you probably got it. Well, what it was, it was—it was the people who were doing the infrastructure-building of the country. If you'd have asked me that maybe 20 years ago, I could've gotten it, but—

Interviewer:

But it's basically part of the pacification.

MG N. Creighton:

This is the pacification. But it's really the—it's the part for the future—very important, obviously. But the question was, and—what's the most important here?

MG N. Creighton:

These lives, was the way that I looked at it, because I had Grange's people's lives and my troops' lives, and my own life, I think. But and then there was what they were trying to do, and both of us were trying to defend our interests on that. But so I told, I gave my side of the argument to the Colonel, but I didn't have any ability to convince him.

MG N. Creighton:

So later on, I guess, that evening, I got a call. I guess I've forgotten whether it was from the 101st or from the 11th, or maybe it was from—maybe it was from III—no, it wasn't from III Corps. But anyway, that I was to report to the II Field Forces Commander the next morning, at his office at the II Field Force Headquarters. That was General Weyand. And it's kind of unusual—

Interviewer:

This was—was that a Vietnamese? He was a Vietnamese, or?

MG N. Creighton:

No, he was the—he was the—he later on became Chief of Staff of the Army.

Interviewer:

Okay.

MG N. Creighton:

And he was—I mean Westmoreland was still commanding. Abrams was number two, and

there were two Field Forces, the First and the Second. I don't know who was commander of the First at the time—that was up north—but General Weyand was really the senior tactical officer in the southern part of Vietnam. And actually, the 11th Armored Cavalry was, basically, a part of II Corps—I mean II Field Forces. So, anyway

Interviewer:

Did you fear the worst? Did you think you were going to get chewed out?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, I didn't figure it was going to be very good, but I got to tell you, you know, I felt that I did what I felt was right, and so I wasn't worried about it, but I knew enough to go. So I went to the senior U.S. advisor, who was an Army Colonel named Peters, and who I liked and had known before in the Army staff. And then he took me in to the three-star, General Kahn, who commanded the Vietnamese Corps. And they both heard me out, and they were—they were adamant that I wasn't going alone, that they were going to go with me—I mean with the three-star and the Colonel.

MG N. Creighton:

And so when I went the next morning—and John Paul Vann was supposed to be there. I was told that, also. And so I dutifully reported in to General Weyand's headquarters, and they ushered me in to see General Weyand, and who was in there but the Vietnamese General and the Colonel—and I think they'd already talked to him. John Vann was not there, and I later on found out why he wasn't there. And—but I don't know how much you know about John Vann. You probably know a good deal—maybe much more than I do. I didn't know him—I mean I'd met him, but didn't really know him, and I saw him at meetings.

MG N. Creighton:

But John was a guy had been over there forever and had been very much admired, and a very different kind of guy. And he actually had a couple of Vietnamese families—not just one, but two—and I think both of his families, the wife was expecting, or something like that, and so John was out because he was worried about them and was taking care of them. So he didn't make it to the meeting. So by the time I got there, General Weyand didn't say very much, but he talked to me about what I was doing. And then he said, "Okay, Colonel, go back to your fight, and, you know, keep on going."

Interviewer:

Did every—was everybody in Vietnam familiar with Vann? Did he have sort of this outsized reputation?

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, he did—he did have, and maybe it was well-deserved. But he also had a flair.

Interviewer:

Could you describe that flair—what was it?

MG N. Creighton:

Oh, he was kind of an overpowering thing, and he wasn't willing to argue with you very much, and that's one of the reasons that he dropped out and got out of the Army. But he was one of these guys—you were just asking him my opinions about things. He had been over there long enough to develop his opinions, and he felt that we weren't doing it the right way, and we should be doing it his way. He may have been right, for all I know, but as you probably know, he was killed, I think, in 1971.

Interviewer:

'72, yeah.

MG N. Creighton:

'72 in the Easter Offensive up there, and by that time he was actually commanding that area, even though he was a civilian. So, anyway, that was my story with John Vann, and by that time, after we had done all the tank firing, we never fired the tanks again. There were a few more skirmishes around there. We went down and cleared out the rest of the places. Then we went down, we were attached to the 199th, and then we went off and we were attached to the U.S. 25th.

Interviewer:

This is later on inâ€•later in February?

MG N. Creighton:

This isâ€•now lâ€™m in February. Now lâ€™m in February. And for the month of February, we endedâ€•we started out with the 199th, and then we went to the U.S. 25th, and didnâ€™t have really much action out there. One of my troops went off with theâ€•it was L Troopâ€•went with then-Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Otis, who had a cav troop of the 25th. And they had fought the Battle of Tan Son Nhut like we fought the Battle of Bien Hoa, but then they had a good, a major fight, where my classmate Glenn Otis was very seriously wounded.

MG N. Creighton:

And my troop commander called me up, and I went by and visited him in Cu Chi, and even till today he doesnâ€™t remember my visit, because he was all doped up on the thing. So after that, I began whatever exciting tour in Hau Nghia province, which changed my mindâ€•well, first of allâ€•

Interviewer:

Letâ€™sâ€•weâ€™re going to stop just long enough to change media.

MG N. Creighton:

Okay.

Interviewer:

Then weâ€™ll resume in a momentâ€•one moment.

MG N. Creighton:

I hope weâ€™re not goingâ€•

Interviewer:

Okay. So to pick up where we left off was we were still sort of the aftermath of Bien Hoa, I think.

MG N. Creighton:

Yeah, and actually, we all thought we were chasing the enemy out of there where theyâ€™d gone and attacked the cities during Tet. One ofâ€•the major problem which we had during the time was that, you know, we had neverâ€•it was awfully hard to find the VC, particularly if you were a tanker or youâ€™re in the cav units. You couldnâ€™t surprise them very often. But inâ€•in Tet, you were out there fighting in the cities, and weâ€™d been chasing these guys through the jungle, and so the whole war basically changed.

MG N. Creighton:

We hadnâ€™t done any fighting in cities, and of course they fought in Saigon and Hue and everyplace else over there, in the large areas, and so the war was beginning to change in perspective for those of us fighting at that time. It wasnâ€™t just chasing them into the jungleâ€•it was an all-out battle where they stayed and fought, which they almost never did before.

Interviewer:

Had you been â€œ when you learned about the full extent of the Tet Offensive, and the fullâ€•it encompassed mostâ€•basically, the entire countryâ€•were you surprised? Were youâ€•

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, we were very much surprised by that. But you got to remember the level that we were at. Weâ€™re down at the troop levelâ€•weâ€™re at a regimental level. I donâ€™t really think that II Field Forces was all that surprised. I got the first indication of that back in December when I was still the S-3, because we were with the First Infantry Division, and we were pulled off of the mission with them. They were getting ready to move up to the border areas and we were taking over their areas down by Lai Khe towards Saigon. And they were moving up to the border areas because thatâ€™s where we thought that the enemy was, coming across from Cambodia.

MG N. Creighton:

But all of a sudden in late December, they stopped the two brigades of the First Infantry Division from going up any closer to the border, and gave us the mission. Actually, they stopped all three of their brigades, I guess, I would think so they could keep them closer to Saigon. And that was strange to me—I couldn't figure that out. But I'm sure it was because that they had gotten the idea that hey, those guys aren't up there any more—that there might be something going on back here. And if you read the history books, basically that confirms that. But when you got to my level, we had no idea, so we were very much surprised by what went on.

MG N. Creighton:

I remember what surprised us most, however, is because those battles—that battle I talked to you about, and all the other battles, like Glenn Otis at Tan Son Nhut, and the battles run downtown in Saigon, we thought we were victorious, and we'd accomplished much more than we'd accomplished in the jungle in six months. And then when we saw the newspapers from the United States—I remember my executive officer, Glenn Ryburn, brought in a paper his wife had sent him from Baltimore, the Baltimore Sun, which is talking about the great victory for the NVA and the VC. And we couldn't believe it.

MG N. Creighton:

And so during that time, actually, General Weyand flew out to see us—the II Field Forces commander. And I met him when he got off his helicopter, and he said, "Hey, Creighton, get your staff together and brief me on what's going on." And I said, "Yes, sir, I'll be glad to, but I got a request to you first." I said, "You know, we don't understand what happened, because after this big fight that we've just had and we thought so successful, I mean what we read is everybody thought the other side won. Could you explain to us what's going on in the United States?" And the General said, "Certainly I will."

MG N. Creighton:

And actually, he gave us a, you know, I think he might've mentioned that they did have some indication. But he gave us a good indication of what he thought about what was going on in the United States. So we were getting—that gave us kind of a red flag about how Tet was going to be viewed in the future.

Interviewer:

Well, it's also the difference between—it also highlights what the difference between a military victory and a political victory.

MG N. Creighton:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Interviewer:

Whereas the United States Forces scored a military victory—

MG N. Creighton:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

By being able to I mean inflict severe damage upon the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, the Communist forces scored an incredible political victory by the very fact that they were able to pull off Tet.

MG N. Creighton:

Right, and I was looking at it from the lower level. We thought—we were proud of what we'd done.

Interviewer:

Did your—did your unit take many casualties during the Bien Hoa episode?

MG N. Creighton:

No, not during the Bien Hoa episode. Most of the casualties—and I had, basically, wounded. I had a fair amount of wounded, but they tended not to get killed. I had about two or three killed in that fight. But the infantry that was with us, Grange's infantry, took some pretty heavy casualties.

Interviewer:

What was it like, what was the morale like at this point in the war, your own morale, and you think, the morale of the larger morale of U.S. Forces, from what you could tell?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, it was still very good, as a matter of fact. I mean I didn't really have any court-martial problems. Every now and then, some guy would get off and be with some Unit that went to pick up supplies someplace else and get in some problem in a bar or something like that. But I didn't see there wasn't any fragging. Nobody ever mentioned fragging. We never even thought about fragging, which came much later on in the war, into a lot of other units. I think people believed in what we were doing. People wanted to get out there and participate. It was it was kind of a pleasure to lead the soldiers.

Interviewer:

So what happened, what did your Unit do after Tet?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, after Tet, I told you we went around and we had some small firefights, and then I was at my fire base, oh, north of Saigon, when Colonel McFarlane, who's now commander of the regiment, came in. And he came in with my replacement as S-3, who was Jack Delamain out of the class of '54. And they had a new mission for the Third Squadron, which was kind of in a different kind of mission. We were going to be detached, or no longer reporting to our own Unit, the 11th Armored Cavalry, or to a U.S. Unit, but we were going to be in direct support of an ARVN Division, the 25th ARVN Division, which was out in Hau Nghia province.

MG N. Creighton:

And I asked Colonel McFarlane, you know, "What does direct support mean?" And he says, "That's what we want you to find out." And he said, "This is it," he didn't mention the word "Vietnamization," but basically that's what it was. It was basically, as far as in looking back on it, it must've been at the higher levels, and Westmoreland was still commanding, that they decided that the Vietnamese should gradually take over the war. And they decided that let's give a U.S. unit to them with some firepower.

Interviewer:

Cause up until this point, had you had any, you hadn't really had any connection like that with them.

MG N. Creighton:

No, and we had really no combat connection with them at all. They were fighting their war, we were fighting our war. Now we're going out, and we're supposedly going to work for them. And so we got that mission, on 1 March 1968, we moved over by Duc Hoa, which was in the southern part of Hau Nghia province. And the 25th ARVN Division, which had the I guess the unenviable reputation of being about the worst-performing ARVN division in the Vietnamese Army, and they had some tough terrain over there, and we were sent over there to work with them to help them with their mission.

MG N. Creighton:

So it was we moved over into Hau Nghia on 1 March. I set up a fire base, I had learned some stuff from the 25th Infantry Division. We used to always move our fire bases every three days. Because when you moved around as often as we did, you could always depend, if you moved first two days, they wouldn't mortar you on the third day, inevitably, you'd get mortared. So we tried to move every three days. But the 25th did some pretty good things about digging their stuff in, their tanks in and everything else, and so I had when we went out there, I took some engineer equipment with me.

MG N. Creighton:

And we dug in a fire base, and we were actually called Fire Support Base Buffalo, and we stayed in that fire base and had, actually, seven major battles around it with the ARVN 25th, you know, as our infantry. The and we dug them in, and we stayed in that base.

Now, we did get mortared, but we didn't really get much damage on the thing. I mean I even—we even put in all my armored carriers where I had my headquarters and everything as overhead cover.

Interviewer:

Did you have any trepidation about supporting the ARVN, based upon their reputation? Based upon the reputation of the ARVN in general?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, I think I was more curious, quite frankly. Here again, like I said, I never had the feeling that we were going to be overrun or overpowered, because I had so much firepower. And I thought anywhere I was, we'd be able to survive it, regardless if they did well or didn't do well. First thing I did was get in my helicopter and fly to Duc Hoa where the Division Headquarters was and reported in to the division commander, and to his advisor, senior U.S. advisor, a guy named Colonel Marshall Sanger. Sanger was from the Class of '46, and I had known him before and I knew him later on.

MG N. Creighton:

And he was very helpful, and so were any of his advisors over there. So it was a tremendous chapter. Later on, General Abrams was to call it the biggest chapter in the history of the ARVN 25th Division, working for them for that 45-day period.

Interviewer:

But you said you saw a lot of action during that 45 days.

MG N. Creighton:

We did. What happened—the way it began to work out—now, I say I reported into the ARVN Division commander, but I had very little to do with him during that time. I used John Getgood, who by this time was my experienced S-3, and he would go over every day, talk to Sanger and talk to the others. My infantry, now, is coming from the ARVN 25th—it was mainly, most times, it was the 49th Infantry Regiment. However, we also worked with regional forces. I went to see—the next guy I went to see was the province chief, the Vietnamese province chief of Hau Nghia.

MG N. Creighton:

So then we've got to call on all these forces, and it didn't turn out to be a problem working for the ARVN, because they basically opted out. They gave us an area to operate, which is most of Hau Nghia Province, but most of their troops were occupied to the south, down towards the Delta, so anything that took place in that 45 days, we did the planning for. We did the troop requirements and they almost every time filled our troop requirements when there was something that we wanted. And what we brought to the ARVN—now, the ARVN in those days were carrying M1 rifles, and of course they're 5.56 and 5.56, and the M1 rifle's a big rifle.

MG N. Creighton:

And it was a great rifle in World War II, but it certainly wasn't a great rifle to haul around in Vietnam. When they had a casualty, they had to carry him back, and then they had to get some kind of ground transportation to carry him back and get to the hospitals, which weren't as accessibilized. If they were with us, we could use our helicopters. We could had a call on two field forces to evacuate the Vietnamese as well as us. And the other thing was all the regiment was not operationally controlling it—they were still logistically supporting us.

MG N. Creighton:

So not only did I have my squadron, I had to call on all Thunderhorse aircraft and all the helicopters, and that's the broader support we could get in there right away. The Vietnamese had very few gunships in those days. Now, they did—the VNAF had air support, but when we went with the ARVN, we got—when we'd call for air support, we got both U.S. and VNAF. It was the best of all worlds.

Interviewer:

VNAF is—

MG N. Creighton:

VNAF is the Vietnamese Air Force kind of thingâ€•

Interviewer:

Gotcha.

MG N. Creighton:

And theyâ€™re not flying jetsâ€•theyâ€™re flying props. And they were very good at close air support, and we used them all the time, and I had VNAF forward air observers with me and everything because of that division. It turned out to be almost too successful, quite frankly.

Interviewer:

How so?

MG N. Creighton:

Because I think it gave a big push towards Vietnamization, which didnâ€™t work out in the end. We hadâ€•we had seven major fights. Now, these fights, I talked about how before weâ€™d been bashing through the jungle, and shooting at them with canister. The battles we hadâ€•the terrain we were in, itâ€™s the dry season. Itâ€™s like a brick. And youâ€™re out in open rice fields. And in those daysâ€•and Iâ€™ve been back since thenâ€•they didnâ€™t rotate cropsâ€•they just planted rice, so thereâ€™s no rice there now. And so our tanks and tracks are moving over open terrain.

MG N. Creighton:

Our enemies are in villages. We can corner them in villages, and all of that we did, and we were firing. My soldiers who hadnâ€™t used theirâ€•my tankers who hadnâ€™t used their rangefinders in a year and a half now found that they could use the rangefinders. But boy, we had a battle on, on 12 March whereâ€•

Interviewer:

This is 12 March â€™68.

MG N. Creighton:

12 March 1968, and not far from our base camp. It turns out that theâ€•and I found this out years later when I went back with the VC division commander who was in that area, long after the war was over. They were there getting ready for the second Tet, and they really didnâ€™t want to go out and fight us because they had a mission to attack the cities again. And so when we came in, it was kind of a shock to him and shock to all the villagers, â€™cause hardly any troops had been in that area before. The U.S. 25th was to the north.

MG N. Creighton:

This was the responsibility of the ARVN 25th, but they really had never done anything in the area. So weâ€•we ran out, went out, and I sent out a tank company with Captain Don Robison, and then I sentâ€•well, I sent Robison out, and he had some platoons, I guess, from I Troop, which Captain Chuck Schmidtâ€•and Chuck was also a West Point Officer. I donâ€™t knowâ€•I think heâ€™s out of â€™64. And they had captured some prisoners, and they were bringingâ€•and they went into town and they captured these prisoners and theyâ€™re bringing them back, and all of a sudden, a tremendous amount of fire erupted.

MG N. Creighton:

And so they tried to attack the city again, and they got driven back by the fire. So then they regrouped. By this time, I was there, and so we had aâ€•devised a plan so we could go back in the city like we normally would do, put down covering fire. Not city, but a little villageâ€•and just try to smoke them out and see really what was there. Well, you know, I got back in my chopper, and I had a different pilot that day rather than I think Manning, so weâ€™re flying around, and weâ€™d been flying around for a number of hours. And he said, â€œColonel,â€ he said, â€œweâ€™re almost out of gas. Weâ€™ve got to go back and get some gas.â€

MG N. Creighton:

I said, â€œWeâ€™ll go to Duc Hoa, itâ€™s closer.â€ So we went to Duc Hoa and got some gas. And in the meantime, Colonel McFarlane, the regimental commander, flies in. Even though heâ€™s not in command, I guess heâ€™s coming out to see whatâ€™s

going on, which is fine, and part of his job. So—but he lands on the ground. Now, McFarlane’s 6â€™6â€™, our infantry is 5â€™2â€™. You can imagine how this guy stands out. Now, McFarlane—and we’d been in fights before over there, and he seemed—I don’t know if it was a leadership technique or what it was, but he took a tremendous amount of chances.

MG N. Creighton:

I remember my Sergeant Major now going up to regiment to be his Sergeant Major, and he said, “This guy’s going to get me killed because I have to go around with him everywhere.” So anyway, the tank company man, Robison, decides, I think with some encouragement from McFarlane, because I hadn’t quite gotten back yet, to move forward. And as they move forward, this hellacious amount of fire came, and the first guy to go down was the 6â€™6â€™ Colonel with three AK slugs in him. And Sergeant Major’s out there, exposed, with him, and they’re firing at him, and he’s dragging the Colonel back.

MG N. Creighton:

Captain Robison, who’s my ground commander, sees this going on. Now, Robison, who was on his second tour in Vietnam and an experienced soldier, pushes himself up in the turret, and he had always had a bad habit of not buttoning his flak jacket. And when he pushed him up to go out and see what the Colonel, what was wrong with the Colonel, somebody put a bullet right in his chest, and he died immediately. So I was on the air to him, talking to him, and it stopped, and that’s always a bad sign. I was to learn later on that it could be a terrible sign, like it was a terrible sign then.

MG N. Creighton:

So I landed on—on the ground, and we were trying to get—and there were some other casualties, too.

Interviewer:

Is—did the Colonel survive?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, yes, the Colonel did survive. Amazingly, he did survive, with all three of those slugs in him, and later on came back to command a brigade in northern Vietnam, and also came as a General Officer, right before he retired. But he was down there, and all of a sudden the chopper came in from the 25th Division, div artillery commander—Roy Thurman, class of ’46, was the div artillery commander over there. And we were waiting for the—the—the dust-off, the medical chopper, and Thurman says, “I don’t think this guy’s going to live—let me take him.”

MG N. Creighton:

So he took him, and actually probably saved his life. So there I was—I had to take over the ground command of that, and we went forward, and I called in air, both Vietnamese and U.S., and I called in artillery, but I really didn’t try to push them out of there right away. But it was the heaviest flak that I’d ever seen, and when the U.S. planes and the others coming in, they’d come in and they’d be shooting their machine guns and rockets, and these guys on the ground, they had anti-aircraft guns, and they were shooting right back at them. I was amazed we didn’t lose any of them.

MG N. Creighton:

But it’s—and it turns out, years later when I asked the division commander, he said, “I had my anti-aircraft battalion with me.” And he said, “They were shooting at you that day along the thing.” And so the upshot of the battle is it really went into the night. And the next morning, we pushed all the way through. I couldn’t block them ’cause it was such open terrain. I tried to put—put one of the cav troops behind them to block them, but I really didn’t get them. But there was—they had major casualties on the thing, and that was the start of the seven battles, which almost all of them went the same way.

MG N. Creighton:

They—they were trying to avoid us, but it was open terrain, and what we were doing, you

know, we would sit there and make our own plans and say where we could go, and we were fairly successful with that, and then my own group of planners, which included my principal staff and Getgood, to go down and work it out with the 25th. They sent either—sometimes they would send their Ranger battalion with us, which was their best infantry battalion. And we were on I think it was either the 15th or 16th of—actually, we had a battle that took place. It started on the 15th and it went through the 17th. It was a three-day battle.

MG N. Creighton:

And the first day, we—it was earlier in the morning than the battle on the 12th had started, but when it started, we were supporting, but the ground infantry that made the major attack was the Ranger battalion, and—

Interviewer:

Vietnamese Rangers.

MG N. Creighton:

Vietnamese Ranger battalion—and actually, we were driving them through the city, and we were chasing them out of there, and we were shooting them with helicopters on the other side. And all of a sudden, I got a call from Getgood on the radio. Said, “The Ranger battalion commander is stopping the fight and he’s pulling out.” And so I talked to Getgood. I said, “Go back and talk to him again.” Then I landed on the ground. And here—the Vietnamese Lieutenant Colonel, Ranger battalion commander. I said, “What are you doing?”

MG N. Creighton:

He said, “Well, I’m taking my troops back to Duc Hoa because it’s evening.” And I said, “What? You know, we got these guys on the run.” And he said, “Yes, I know,” he said, “but their families and everybody’s back there, and there’s protection, they’re protected back there. People are not protecting their families now.” And then he says—I tried to push him on, and he said—he gave me a little philosophy. He said, “You know, I’ve been fighting this war since the French were here, and you know, fighting.” And he said, “I’ve always found enough people to fight.”

MG N. Creighton:

He said, “We come back here tomorrow.” I said, “We’ll be here.” And it was a philosophical note. I mean here I was going to be over there one year. I went into the war in one year, and so did all the troops, and so did General Westmoreland and everybody else. Here’s this guy, since, you know, 1954 or something like that, that’s been fighting the war. And I noticed like that was the kind of the attitude of a awful lot of the senior Vietnamese officers over there. Of course, part of the other side of it was, later on I was to find out when I met the senior NVA guys, they, too, had been fighting all that same kind of period, all along the thing.

MG N. Creighton:

But it also taught me something about how to deal with—with the Vietnamese officers that I was working with. So anyway, then we kept running into them, and it got din—I’ve forgotten the big battle that was going on up north at that time. Anyway, it was a major U.S. installation up by—by—

Interviewer:

You’re at Khe Sanh?

MG N. Creighton:

Khe Sanh—the battle at Khe Sanh was going on at the same time. And I looked around me there one evening during all while this was going on, and it went on until April, and I had nothing but newspaper people around, and television people. And so I started talking for this one guy—I think he was NBC. And I said, “What are you, all you guys doing here?” And he said, “Well,” he said, “well, first of all,” he said, “you’re close to the Saigon, and what was the other thing, the battle of Khe Sanh is way up there, and it’s hard to get to.”

MG N. Creighton:

“Second of all,” he said, “you’ve got helicopters, and you’ll fly us back to Saigon at nighttime and I can file my story and do my pitch, and it’ll be on in the morning news back in the States, which is a great thing for us.” And then he said that “what else” he said “anyway, he was just saying how convenient” “oh, yeah, he said” “yeah, the final thing he says is, “Besides that, tanks make good TV.” So I understood his part.

Interviewer:

“but but but Vietnam was the first television war and things.

MG N. Creighton:

That’s right. That’s right. And we got a tremendous amount of publicity. Of course, that got us publicity with all the high-ranking officials. By this time, we were the great favorite of the Vietnam III Corps commander because of the publicity, but also because we had relieved him during Tet at his headquarters there. So he became a great supporter on the thing. Westmoreland and we had these seven fights and incidentally, like I say, Robison was killed. I replaced him with another commander by the name of Nelka.

MG N. Creighton:

Nelka was shot in the head in the same tank, and by his first fight. It was his first fight, and I was talking to Nelka on the radio when he got killed. And I landed, and he was hit in the head and I thought he was dead. He actually survived, but he never came back on active duty after that. And so then my S-4 guy, a guy named Bob Wilson, wanted to command the tank company. And so he had just remarried in the States to a lady who was a widow of a Vietnam veteran who had just been killed, and so then he’d come to Vietnam very good officer and then he took over the tank company.

MG N. Creighton:

And a couple of weeks later, lo and behold, I’m talking to Wilson, and he stops. And I land the helicopter, and we’re outside of a place called Cu Chi, and he had taken an RPG round into the chest. It went into his chest, and it was still there, and he was still in his tank, and now I’m sitting there with him dead, and a battle’s going on, and the medics come, and we’ve got to get this guy out of the tank with a live round in him, and that was quite an experience then. Fortunately, it never went off on the doggone thing. So my tank company commander’s having a hard time.

MG N. Creighton:

Their executive officer was named I’ve forgotten his name now but he had to take over each time on the thing, so he became a pretty good company commander, and

Interviewer:

Was that your worst day in Vietnam?

MG N. Creighton:

No, I think really my worst day in Vietnam was my third day there, when the 14 guys were laying out there in front of me, including the company commander. No, by that time, I mean I had casualties all along, and I’m just talking about some of the Captains. But one of the sadder things was was early on, even before Tet, I sat down I was at the fire base, and I sat down. I just picked out a tank and went over, and there was the drive and Lieutenant Harris was the platoon leader and we talked. We talked about families and homes.

MG N. Creighton:

And the next day we had a small firefight, and both those two were killed. And but you don’t say you don’t say, “Gee, this was a bad day,” and go on. you’ve got too much to do for the next day. It’s only, I guess, I hate to say it, but it’s only in retrospect that you can put these things into some kind of prism where you can look at them and say, “Gee, that was a terrible day.” Because you when we unloaded Wilson out of the tank, I had to go back and fight the battle of the doggone thing.

Interviewer:

But it brings up and you sound like there was tremendous casualties among junior officers.

MG N. Creighton:

Yes. They were—they were, because, well, if you know tanks, you're up in the tank, and—and if you're making an attack on a village or fortified area, you don't tend to close up the hatch or anything like that. At least my people didn't. And when I as in my own ACAV and using it that way, I didn't either on the thing, because you want to see what's going on. They're in control on that, so we did. One of the sadder times, we had a really—there was a platoon leader in the tank company, and I attached him, I think it was to an L Company thing.

MG N. Creighton:

So we'd attach a tank platoon to a troop, and attach one cav troop to the tank battalion, so I could use them all interchangeably. And—but we came out, we were with the First Division, and the rules of the First Division, which were good rules, that you couldn't load your machine guns till you went out the front gate of your home base. And so he went out the front gate, and the 50 caliber's up where the tank commander is, and he pulled it back to—to—to load it, and it went forward and fired. And his platoon leader was in the tank in front of him, and the bullet went right through his head. But the story goes on. The 11th Armored Cavalry was the armored unit—Fort Knox is the home of armor—so my wife is from Louisville, Kentucky, and so are a lot of the others, so they live there.

MG N. Creighton:

And so my wife became active on the post and with the thing, so she got a call from the base saying that the Sergeant had been killed, and he was in my unit, and would she like to go out with them? Now, they'd already notified the lady that her husband was dead, but—and they'd also told her how he got killed, which, you know, was pretty sad. By the time my wife went out there, she said that the lady didn't want to talk to her, or didn't want to talk to the survival officers or anything.

MG N. Creighton:

And the lady was a German lady who had married in Germany, and I guess she didn't have any relatives around Louisville. And my wife said it was a very sad scene. So there's a lot of all these I guess small incidences that add up, and you think about them in later years. But you just—over there, you think about what's going on tomorrow and what am I going to do and etc. But anyway, going back, we'd gotten as far as citations. Well, and the other thing that happened out to—I mentioned what General Abrams said about our operation in Hau Nghia with the 25th.

MG N. Creighton:

General Westmoreland sent us a very nice congratulatory telegram, like I said, and General Weyand came back out again to visit us, and the VC—when we left, the III Corps commander came out and gave medals to a huge amount of my people and things like that. We got a lot—a lot of publicity. But we'd gotten the Valorous Unit Citation for the Tet operation—for that operation, we got the Presidential Unit Citation. And I didn't even know, quite frankly, that had been put in, until I got a call about a year later from the White House, from my classmate John Seigle said, he said, "Oh, I see where your squadron, they got the Presidential Unit Citation."

MG N. Creighton:

I said, "Well, send me a copy." I didn't even know about it. But anyway, the Vietnamese then, they came across, and they gave us whatever their top unit citation was, so that turned out to be—and I've read reports since then, by II Field Forces and others, which credited that operation with starting a new way to work with the Vietnamese. And I could see how it led to increased emphasis on Vietnamization.

Interviewer:

I mean you thought—you thought that the Vietnamese of the 23rd—was it the 23rd Division—

MG N. Creighton:

25th.

Interviewer:

25th Division wereâ€•were fine, fine soldiers.

MG N. Creighton:

Theyâ€•I meanâ€•well, I sat there, and I saw them in the battle. They went in the battle, they died in the battleâ€•they were the major casualties in the battle, butâ€•and they never, outside of that one talk I had with the Ranger commander there wasnâ€™t anyâ€•any friction between us. They were delighted to come out with us. And so I thought it was a great way to do things. Unfortunately, it really wasnâ€™t transferable in the way that they did the Vietnamization, because it required you to have a U.S. unit and all these backup things which made them effective, which if you go home, you canâ€™t do that.

Interviewer:

So in a sense, it wasnâ€™t fully representative ofâ€•

MG N. Creighton:

No.

Interviewer:

What the Vietnamese could do on their own, because they had suchâ€•

MG N. Creighton:

Thatâ€™s right.

Interviewer:

Remarkable or in-depth American support.

MG N. Creighton:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Iâ€™m curious. Some of the other officers in here talked about theâ€•about the emphasis upon theâ€•by the U.S. command upon body counts, you know, aboutâ€•was that an issue for you? Were you always being forced toâ€•

MG N. Creighton:

Yes. Absolutely, and it was one that you realized the first fight you were in, you know, why are you doing this, and you ask. And I was, I guess, as a Lieutenant Colonel I was up high enough to question it. What would happenâ€•well, like the battle on the twelfth, or any of the other battles in all the seven battles we had out there, which had high body counts. And weâ€™re talking when you add all those up, that was in the hundreds. By late afternoon, Getgoodâ€™s three shop was getting requests from regiment, II Field Forces, everybody else, the ARVN 25th Division, for a body count, and you canâ€™t go out there when theyâ€™re shooting at you.

MG N. Creighton:

And so what you do is you go down and you make a general call to the troops out there who are fighting, to the company commander and all this kind of stuff, â€œWhatâ€™s the body count?â€• Heâ€™s saying the same thing Iâ€™m saying. â€œWant me to go out there and get shot, Colonel? And how can I do thatâ€•I donâ€™t know how many are buried down there.â€• And then the Air Force is calling in and saying, â€œHow much of the body count did we get?â€• I mean so you spent the last half-hour fighting, supposedly, answering people on the body count. I remember at one of the fights, which I had most of my forces there, so there were a lot of reports.

MG N. Creighton:

And they came in, and the body countâ€•I said, you know, â€œWe couldnâ€™t have killed that many people.â€• And I said, â€œDivide the damn thing in half.â€• I said, â€œIâ€™m just not going to report that many people.â€• Then the other things you could compare sometimes the body counts to the weapons captured, and stuff like that. The body count was done for when youâ€™re sitting in Washington, or maybe youâ€™re sitting in MACV, for logical reasons, because they wanted to know how effective they were in blocking the troops coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, or into the country, or how effective we were in reducing the VC. Which we really did reduce them in Tet, and probably never knew it until later years on the thingâ€•but so then they wantâ€•so thatâ€™s the way they were judging

success, but it made no sense to us down in the line.

Interviewer:

And I can also see how it could produce a tremendous cynicism.

MG N. Creighton:

It does. I mean because they were demanding that you tell them or give them a number on the thing. It was an issue. I think it affected all of us over there.

Interviewer:

Did you have an issue, too, with shortage of—•a shortage of sufficient—•shortage of non-commissioned officers and junior officers, too?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, I was very lucky with my non-commissioned officers, —™cause they were armor NCOs, and we didn™t have that much armor over there. And in fact, when I took the—•I went to the regiment, I found a bunch of the NCOs from the Sixth Cavalry, so I had known these guys for 15-16 years, and we had some tremendous non-commissioned officers. The problem came in by 1968, when we were getting in these brand-new Lieutenants, and all the problems going on back then in our country at the colleges and things like that.

MG N. Creighton:

They would come in, and a prime example was Lieutenant Calley. Well, I had a couple of Lieutenant Calleys in my outfit—•not guys that shot the enemy, but they were incompetent. And they™re—•a lot of them didn™t even have college educations or anything. They were coming in. And so what I would do, when one of the troop commanders would say, —œLieutenant So-and-so got here two weeks ago, and he got two guys killed today,— or something like that, I said, —œPut him in my chopper. I™ll send him back to regiment.— So I did, and regiment screamed about that on the doggone thing. So I—•

Interviewer:

But you™re noticing a real fall-off in the quality.

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, a real fall-off, because the ones who™d come over there before and had gone home during my time, like I say, I had—•I mean I had six West Pointers as troop commanders over there during my time, and so I had some really good Captains. But the Lieutenants were not coming in with that fill. So I called up my good friend, and I mentioned his name earlier, Mike Cousland, who was working at the personnel up in II Field Forces, said, —œI™d like to talk to that Brigadier General who runs assignments,— and so I told Mike what I wanted.

MG N. Creighton:

And Mike lined it up so I flew to—•to II Field Force headquarters at Bien Hoa. He ushered me in there to see the General, and I told the General, I said, —œYou know, General, you™re sending up to the 11th Cavalry, the only armored unit, and only the biggest armored unit here, officers mainly coming out of OCS, etc., not college-educated. And you™re sending the guys who were coming out of the great ROTC programs and the West Pointers off to these other outfits.— I said, —œYou know, who™s going to be running the armor 20 years from now? The guys that are running armor should be with this armor unit, and learn it, because they™re going to be the leaders of the armor. And the Lieutenants I™m getting in—•—

MG N. Creighton:

And he™d already heard about my sending these guys in a helicopter back to regiment. And I said, —œThey™re just not of the caliber, and you ought to look ahead and say, —™I™m going to assign to that armor unit these guys who have this kind of background, with an education, and have great possibilities in the future.—™— And the General says, —œI agree.— And so I got to tell you, the first Lieutenant I got in after that trip was a guy named Tommy White. Now, I don™t know if you know who Tommy White was, but he later became a General and the Secretary of the Army.

And the second one I got in was a distinguished graduate who also became a General

Officer. And after that, II Field Forces were very good. But that wasâ€•it wasâ€•thatâ€™s the reason we had issues like Calley.

Interviewer:

Did you also notice a change in the quality of the enlisted personnel by the end, by the second half of your tour?

MG N. Creighton:

It hadnâ€™t happened yet. It happened about a year or so later. I haveâ€•my West Point roommate is the most decorated officer in my class.

Interviewer:

Who would that be?

MG N. Creighton:

Major General Sandy Meloyâ€•he commanded the 82nd Airborne later on. And he was over there, and he got the DSC over there. Then he came back overâ€•heâ€™s one of the very few who came back overâ€•and he commanded a battalion for a year. Well, I saw his battalion on television, and what they were showing, it was a couple of his guys out smoking pot on an OP, and things had really goneâ€•gone to pot at that part of the war. But I was just ahead of the power curve.

MG N. Creighton:

But Meloyâ€™s experiencesâ€•he couldâ€™ve been our best battalion commander over there, I donâ€™t know, butâ€•and heâ€•heâ€™s he would uphold the fact that the Army went down between his two commands over there. And I could see it in the rest of the Army, because by this time, later on, I was the Colonel commanding in Schweinfurt, which was a big base in Germany. And this was after the war, but I spent all my time trying to educate my soldiers to read. And I went on patrol myself downtown with my Sergeant Major every weekend to keep them out of trouble. The Army was in big trouble with the quality of soldiers we were getting in.

Interviewer:

Tell me a little aboutâ€•about your departure from Vietnam when did youâ€•when your tour was up in middle of â€™68.

MG N. Creighton:

Middle of â€™68, in July of â€™68, and I was replaced by another West Pointer, John McHenry out of the class of â€™49. Iâ€™

Interviewer:

One thing Iâ€™ve got to remark upon is that Iâ€™m struck that for your experienceâ€•you were reallyâ€•it was almost like the West Point connection was all around you. It was almost like a giant fraternity, in a way, at least some of the officers you dealt with. You basically went to war with people you went to school withâ€•

MG N. Creighton:

Right.

Interviewer:

This is the question.

MG N. Creighton:

Thatâ€™s right. And thatâ€™s absolutely right. But I have to say that I was amazed how much the West Point presence was in the 11th Cavalry. And I attribute a lot of that to Colonel Farley, because he started it. When I was a Lieutenant in the Sixth Cavalry in the 1950s, I was the only West Point Lieutenant in my whole squadron, and there was another one, there were two more down in the second squadron, and one of the regimental commanders was a West Pointer. So thatâ€™s what always struck me as so unusual.

MG N. Creighton:

And when Iâ€•and I worked with a lot of the divisions in Vietnam, particularly the First Infantry Division, which I later on commanded, and they were not all that West Point-affluent, or whatever you want toâ€•whatâ€™s the word you call on this thing. But thatâ€™s the reason I was so struck with this one.

Interviewer:

And how do you think that changed—how did that change your experience, do you think? I mean did that—

MG N. Creighton:

I'm not so sure it really changed my experience, other than I think it worked the way Farley wanted it to work. He got good, competent commanders. That's not to say that others wouldn't have been competent commanders, but he played his odds, and I think that—I never—well, actually, I never really had I guess the opportunity to fill my units like that. When I became a division commander, I stopped by and saw the Army Chief of Staff, and he said, "I'm going to help you." And he said, "I'll let you fill the following positions with anybody you want."

MG N. Creighton:

"You can pick your own Chief of Staff and your own Sergeant Major and your own enlisted aide, and that's it." Then he'd say, "You got 18,000 people—that's three flats." Yeah, it wasn't enough anyway, and that's probably the way it should be, and I don't think Farley would—he just did it based on the odds. And it went—it changed, I'm sure, over the years there, but if you do go over the list of armor commanders in there, even after I left, they're almost all West Pointers.

Interviewer:

Anyway, to resume your—to resume the story of your departure from Vietnam.

MG N. Creighton:

Well, it's nothing really unusual, my departure from Vietnam, except when I did depart—and actually, I had a—when McFarlane, I talked about when he took those three AT rounds and almost died, he was replaced by a commander. His name was Len Holder, and Len Holder was a well-known armor officer—a non-West Pointer—who had come from Fort Knox and really had a great reputation. And he came in after McFarlane was shot, and a battle on 20—there was a big battle, one of the seven battles, on 20 March of 1968.

MG N. Creighton:

And I was out there on the ground, and Colonel Holder landed and came up and introduced himself to me. And so the people were even shooting at us out where we were, so I briefed him, and he said, "Well, you're busy. Go back and fight your battle, and we'll get together later on." Well, the day after that, or two days after that, he took off in a helicopter from Long Binh and hit a wire and turned over, and the chopper fell on him and killed him. So that was two battalion—two regimental commanders gone. And then when we had another commander come in—it was a guy named Dick Gorder, out of the class of '45.

MG N. Creighton:

And I had known Dick Gorder—he taught me English, I think it was, when I was a cadet. And then we were stationed together, actually went on vacations together, in Spain. And so Dick Gorder was my regimental commander for the last four months—I got along with him very well, and actually, he was a very good commander, but he didn't—he left just when I left, two days after, and a guy named George Patton came in, who is a good friend of mine and the son of the famous General. But George took over the regiment. When I left, Getgood left with me.

MG N. Creighton:

Sinclair, who was class I think of '64 or something like that, he was my S-2—he left with me. And a couple of others did, so we didn't do as good a job as we wanted by trying to infiltrate new people in there. McHenry was taking over, basically, a new staff to run the war. But I had thought that we had—we were doing very well in Vietnam when I left. It was—

Interviewer:

Was it hard leaving at all?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, it was. I mean it was—I mean I remember even when I went on R&R in Hawaii, when I first got there I kept looking around the corner at who was going to shoot at me and all that type of thing. You get—you get used to that, and it was hard to leave. When I got back, my sister, who was an anti-war protester, and her husband was a college professor, said, “Well, what did you think of your year in Vietnam?” And I said, “Well, you know, I’ve got to say all those years the Army spent training me to be an officer and fight in combat.

MG N. Creighton:

“And I finally was really in combat, that I think professionally, it was probably the best year I ever had.” And I think it did teach me an awful lot—taught me an awful lot about people. And like most veterans, I still go to all the reunions and keep up with the war.

Interviewer:

Did you have any troubles with PTSD or anything like that—any—

MG N. Creighton:

Not that I recognize. My wife would probably not agree with me. No, I—I—I really didn’t, as a matter of fact. I went off and did other things, and—

Interviewer:

And you ended up serving in the Army till when—you basically after Vietnam you—

MG N. Creighton:

Yeah, after Vietnam and successively, I went back to the Army staff for a year—actually, just two months after I went back, I was picked for the Army War College, went to the Army War College. Came out of the Army War College, went to the Office of the Secretary of the Army as a military assistant, worked on the Panama Canal treaties. Then I went for the State Department for a year at the Senior Seminar on Foreign Policy, which was a fabulous year because our mission was to travel around the country and find out what was going on in the States.

MG N. Creighton:

And I went down and sat with the minority leader, a guy named Gerald Ford, and had a nice conversation with him. I went out to California for a week with the Governor and his staff, and ended up having breakfast with the Governor, a debriefing, when I left, and it was a guy named Ronald Reagan. Went from there to Atlanta, where I met a guy that—

Interviewer:

Let me guess—a peanut farmer.

MG N. Creighton:

He was a peanut farmer. And we’ve had—incidentally, I knew Ford fairly well afterward, but it was through Carter. And so anyway, I had never met Carter before, and so in the Senior Seminar we went down there, I went down with a couple more. And after the initial meeting, I think it was Jody whatever his name was came up to me, and he said—

Interviewer:

Jody Hamill? Jody—

MG N. Creighton:

Powell.

Interviewer:

Jody Powell.

MG N. Creighton:

Jody Powell. And he said, “The Governor would like to see you.” And there was another guy in there, in the Seminar, who was with the Associated Press, so the two of us go see this guy in Georgia. And he said, “Well,” he said, “I just want you to know that the reason I asked you to come in is because I’m going to Washington next week. It’s my first appearance at the Press Club.” And he said, “I just kind of thought I’d take advantage of this to kind of bounce a few questions off you guys.” And of course the other guy was very helpful, because he’d been a member and been there all along.

MG N. Creighton:

Then he turns to me. What he wanted to know about was several issues with the Army or something like that. But over the years, I've gotten to know President Carter fairly well. I've traveled in Latin America with him and always got there. In fact he visited us several times, and used to come see me in Chicago when I was a civilian—a very interesting guy. But anyway, after the Senior Seminar I went back and went back to Europe and commanded the Combined Arms Training Center, and my boss was General "Shy" Meyer up in Heidelberg. And then I went to the Third Infantry Division as a brigade commander.

MG N. Creighton:

My boss was General "Shy" Meyer, and Shy's the class of '51. And Pat Crizer came in after him, and Pat's the class of '45. And then I went to—I came back to the Army staff, was promoted to General Officer right after I got back, and was the Deputy for—within Dep Ops of the Ops Division, which in those days overlooked Army training and things like that, and operations. And since I was the junior BG, I got to travel the world, and I was the outside guy. And everybody else stayed in Washington and worked on more important things. But after that I commanded the First Infantry Division (Forward), which was a unit in Germany. It was 1/3 of the Infantry Division which was stationed in Southern Bavaria, which was a wonderful command.

Interviewer:

So to say, you ended up back where you began.

MG N. Creighton:

Back where I began, right exact same area there, almost. And then from there, I got promoted to two-star out of that. And then I went to assignment in the Netherlands. Which I never thought was that good, professionally, but it taught me so much about NATO and working with the various other countries on a thing. But the other plus side of it was a lot of our schools in Germany for the dependents were not very good, and part of the problem with my two daughters who were the older two—and the son's the younger one—they—we lived in GÄppingen, which was about over an hour drive from Stuttgart, and they had to go to Stuttgart High.

MG N. Creighton:

And it didn't do either one of them very much good that they couldn't really participate in extracurricular activities. If they did, you got home at 8:00 at night and you were getting up at 6:00 the next morning. And their grades reflected this, and the oldest one we sent back to the States, and fortunately for them, we got orders to up in—to Belgium, to Brunssum, at the Allied Forces Central Europe where I was the senior U.S. guy there. And so they came up, and it was an international school run by a British Colonel who'd run all the schools in Singapore, and the school was tremendous. And it really picked up my other two and really helped them out. And the boy, incidentally, came to here at West Point, and he's class of '89.

Interviewer:

So you retired from the Army in what?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, after that I only took one more real assignment.

Interviewer:

Okay.

MG N. Creighton:

General Meyer sent me to command the First Infantry Division. And after that, I was slated to go back to Washington and go into OSD/ISA and head the Latin—the Western Hemisphere branch. That was during the days of the Contra, and the Chief had said he'd like the Army to have more to do with the Contras, and so he wanted me to go get involved with that. Well, I got a couple of offers, unsolicited, in civilian life, and my son was going, he was starting West Point, and I wasn't anxious for my fifth tour in the Pentagon.

MG N. Creighton:

I guess that was my fourth tour—I went through with it again. But anyway, so that was my fourth tour. But anyway, so I went and told the Chief that I think I'd like to get out, and he wasn't very happy with that, but that's what we did. And so that was my Army career. We went—

Interviewer:

What year did you actually retire? 1981?

MG N. Creighton:

I retired in 1984.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

MG N. Creighton:

And I had—as a General Officer in those days, you could stay thirty-five years, so I had about four more years I could've stayed in. They were holding pretty much to that 35 years. Now, they're going—I think they're wisely going up beyond that.

Interviewer:

Mm. I want to talk a little bit about your trip to Vietnam.

MG N. Creighton:

Yes.

Interviewer:

As you've been back how many times?

MG N. Creighton:

Twice. I went back in 1995, and in those days, I was doing some work for the Chicago Tribune and for TV stations in Chicago, and I had—in my shop I had an Army Colonel I used to do all our trip stuff and that kind of thing. And he had an agency of his own, but he almost exclusively worked for us. And so he set up the trip to Vietnam to go back, and lo and behold, the Vietnamese came back and they said, "Would General Creighton like to talk to General Giap," and so I said, "Yeah, but only if they'll let me take a photographer in so we can film it."

MG N. Creighton:

That did turn out to be a problem in the end, but. So I was lined up to see Giap, and then, as I found out, that Bob McNamara was coming in town, the former Secretary of Defense, and so he was coming to do the Council on Foreign Relations, and I was one of the directors. And so I hosted a lunch for Bob, and we sat together, and lo and behold, he told me he's going back to Vietnam. And I said, "Well, did you have to send questions beforehand so General Giap would know?" And he said, "Yes, I did." And I said, "Well, what were the questions that you sent?"

MG N. Creighton:

Well, he gave me his questions, his list of questions—they were almost exactly the same as mine—naturally, I mean, you know. So I got to Vietnam, and I go in there, and I take the guy with the camera, and I sit down and talk to Giap, and I look in front of me, and behind the camera is what I found out was the Secretary General of the Foreign Office and about three active-duty Generals. And all I could figure out—and Giap was in his 70s now—that they were all watching that he didn't say the wrong thing. Well, he knew my questions, so he started out, and I asked him and all that.

MG N. Creighton:

The question he honed in on—he must've been warned to make it a point—was the Tonkin Gulf, because he started talking about that, and that wasn't one of my questions, as a matter of fact. But anyway, he kept insisting that I would tell everybody that never really happened, and I guess he wanted me to publish an article. And I did write an article about it—I didn't say anything about that or anything. So my conclusion was with Giap, he was pretty well-controlled. He was pretty intelligent, pretty alert, but he didn't talk much about Tet, or he didn't make any pronouncements which I could really use in my article or anything like that.

MG N. Creighton:

Then Bob McNamara goes over about a week and a half later on, but he doesn't have the cameraman or anybody in there, just I'm sure the other people were. And he comes out, and he said, "Well, it was a really historic thing." But I'm sure he got the same answers I did. So that was my—so then we went down to Saigon, and my wife is— I'd sent her down there beforehand, because I had a postponement in my Giap talk, and she was down there with the chairman of the board of the Tribune company. So we had lined up to go being taken around by a organization that was run by NVA, a former NVA officer, so it would take you around to the battlefields.

MG N. Creighton:

That was my 19. And so I met the—that's when I met the commander of the Ninth VC Division, and my wife went and met his wife, and we got to know—and we met his son. And so we went back two years later, and we went into Saigon. This time I was smarter. I took my own maps, and I wouldn't tell them where I was going to go. We'd just all assemble, and I'd say, "Let's go there." I wanted to get their reaction, and it was more forthcoming than I thought. And there were also some of the other—

Interviewer:

What was their reaction—did you—what was their reaction as—

MG N. Creighton:

"Okay, let's go."

Interviewer:

Yeah?

MG N. Creighton:

And they'd go. And then so—so we would go out to the same area. We went to that same place on March 12th where we had that big battle, and the—and this time I took—'cause I was in Chicago—I took a whole bunch of Cubs and Bears hats, you know. And so every one of the NVA had either a Cubs or a Bears hat—I've got pictures at home of all these guys. But anyway, so there was this big monument, and they translated it for me, and it said, "This is—" and I think they had the date wrong by one day, but it was obviously the same battle, and the General told me it was.

MG N. Creighton:

They said that they had destroyed 54 American tanks, and I told the General, I said, "You know, we didn't have 54 German tanks—I mean 54 American tanks in— I said German tanks— American tanks in South Vietnam at that time." And he said no, he insisted that we did. But it seemed like that the whole view was different. I think I said earlier, it was like we were on Mars and they were on the moon. But the other thing, they were all Communist, and particularly the General. He was—he had been at Dien Bien Phu and fought ever since he was 17 years old— committed Communist.

MG N. Creighton:

And now he's getting older, and he tells me all this through a translator, of course. And he had one Colonel who was pretty good, who spoke English. And they were disappointed with what had come through. They said that, "The younger people don't understand what we went through to bring this country together. They don't—they're not Communist. They don't preach Communism." And they thought Communism was the best form of government over there. And I think—and the General died after that, and I think he died a man who was fairly disappointed.

MG N. Creighton:

When he died, his wife wrote me and said, "You were his American friend. We have a custom over here that we have what we call a 'remembrance book.' Would you write him a letter?" So I thought it would be just like a scrapbook we would do, so I wrote him a letter, and I remember I started it out with quoting from Kipling, saying, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," and then "Two strong men from the face of the earth," etc., etc. And so when I got the book, it was a beautifully bound

book she sent me a year later, with his picture on the front.

MG N. Creighton:

And I open it up, and the first letter was from the Prime Minister of Vietnam. Then I thumbed all the way to the back, and there I found out what mustâ€™ve been my letter, because they looked at it, and it looked like they had put it up like poetry up there. And then down at the bottom it had my name on the thing. And the other experience was one day my wife did not go out to the battlefields with us, and so the Generalâ€™s wife in Saigonâ€•this is the â€™98 tripâ€•decided that she would stay with her. So she stayed with my wife and took my wife out to lunch and started talking to my wife, and just talking about things in general.

MG N. Creighton:

And that wasâ€•of course, that was after the go for and she was talking about our son and things like that. And all of a sudden, she said, â€œWould you mind if I have a picture with you and me?â€ And Jo Ann said, â€œNo,â€ and so they had a picture made, and Jo Ann didnâ€™t think anything about it. A few months later, Admiral Zumwalt sent Jim, who was become a real Vietnam expert over the years and lived over there a lot and was in Saigon, in town, when they published the Saigon Times. And there was my wifeâ€™s picture on the front of the Saigon Times. And the article, which Jim had translated for us when we sent it to him, made Jo Ann just like Jane Fondaâ€•

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

MG N. Creighton:

Sound like that, and my wife was just furious. She said, â€œI was so stupid to let them take my picture and put it on there.â€ But anyway, those are our two trips back to Vietnam, and itâ€™s a country which has really made great advances.

Interviewer:

What is your own feeling about the war, in retrospect?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, my own feeling is it was a different world then. Iâ€™m not so sure what wouldâ€™ve happened to Communism if we hadnâ€™t have made a stand. I think that actually had a huge push in really defeating the Communist ideology around the world. It gave it time to develop, and when it developed, it didnâ€™t develop well. And today, Communism is not the issue. And as I wrote and said, â€œIâ€™ve watched Vietnam. Iâ€™ve seen it. Iâ€™ve talked to the people. Iâ€™ve seen what happened to the world. Maybe we did accomplish what we set out to accomplish.

Interviewer:

It tookâ€•it certainly took longer thanâ€•

MG N. Creighton:

It took longer, but eventually, it looked to me as if weâ€™re eitherâ€•we may not have gotten there yet, but I think what we fought for and what we wanted to make actually came about. Maybe thatâ€™s a good place to end.

Interviewer:

One more story, because you mentioned you ran a seminar at one point, and Geraldâ€•President Ford attended that.

MG N. Creighton:

Yes, he did. William Westmoreland attended that. The former Prime Minister of Vietnam attended that.

Interviewer:

What was the program there?

MG N. Creighton:

Well, I started a conference center when I was the President and CEO of the McCormick Tribune Foundation, and McCormick had a 500-acre estate to the west of Chicago called Cantini. And so I made it also into a conference center, and we had a series of conferences, and I brought in Vietnam to that, and so we looked at the conference, and we had guys like Rick Atkinson out there. We had most of theâ€•Bob Sorley, all the officers.

And Gerald Ford came, and I had asked him to talk about Vietnam.

Interviewer:

This is what year?

MG N. Creighton:

This is 1969. I think this is about 1969. No, it was before my trip to Vietnam, I think, so it was 1968 or 1967. And he gave an excellent speech. It was closed to the press, and he told us how he felt when things were going down. And he as President of the United States couldn't affect it—he had to let all these people go. The only thing he could do was try to evacuate as many as he could. And it's a fascinating—I've got it on tape.

But all—everything that happened at that conference, if you go out to the First Infantry Division Museum, which is out there, they have in their archives all the conferences on tape. And they've got an awful lot of things about Vietnam.

Interviewer:

Does any particular phrase that President Ford said at that conference stick with you?

MG N. Creighton:

No, I just think that the most powerful man in the world couldn't do anything to affect it, because of our system. And maybe that's good, and maybe it's bad, but it certainly—you can see the pain which he felt all his life. He was—he was a very good person. I remember when he first came to visit us. He stayed in our guest house, and my wife, who ran the museum there—she ran the McCormick Museum, not the First Infantry Museum—was in charge of taking care of all the visitors. So she said, "Well, Mr. President, what would you want for breakfast tomorrow morning?"

"I'll have the chef come out there and prepare it for you,"—"cause we had a restaurant. And he said, "I'll tell you what I want,"—he said, "I want everything Betty won't let me eat at home." So he had a sense of humor.

Interviewer:

Well, we've been talking for over two hours. I appreciate your time today. Do you have any final words, or?

MG N. Creighton:

No. I mean I appreciate what you're doing, and I hope it works out the way, and it's helpful to those who come after us.

Interviewer:

Well, thank you.