

Interviewee: Sheridan, Mike K. (Brig. General)
Interviewer: Judith Taber
Date of interview: February 25, 2006
Category: Vietnam
Status: Open
Tape location: Box #53

Taber: Is it ok to record this session?

Sheridan: Absolutely.

Taber: Would you like me to call you General, while we are doing this?

Sheridan: Mike.

Taber: Mike, Ok. Ok, Mike. First I would like you to introduce yourself and tell me briefly about your life, career, military or otherwise, before your tour in Vietnam.

Sheridan: I graduated from FSU in 1956. The Korean War was going on in those days and there was something called the “draft” which meant that if you weren’t in the military, you were going to go into the military. I was fortunate that my draft board gave me a student deferment, the famous “2S” student deferment. I was never really quite sure whether the war in Korea might expand and those things might not be worth much, regardless of what your grade point average was. So, I joined the U.S. Marine Corp Reserve when I was 18 years old and figured well, if I do have to go, at least I will be with a first class outfit. I was able to get through college, graduated in 1956 and my Battalion Commander recommended me for Officer Candidate School. Even though, I had been in the reserves, you still owe the government two years of active duty as an enlisted man, and three years as an officer. So, I decided to go to Officer Candidate School and put in three years. After all, I was a college graduate and I thought it would be very prestigious to be a Marine Corp Officer. I went in with many other young men to Officer Candidate School and spent about a year in Quantico, Virginia, in Officer Candidate School and the basics school, teaching us how to be marine officers. We were all reserves and were looking forward to three years in the marines and then out. Then at the end of my tour at Quantico, I was offered a regular commission. I didn’t even know what a regular commission was, except there weren’t really many around in the Marine Corps. I guess I was enjoying myself; I was having a good time. We weren’t getting paid much, but it was certainly a “band of brothers.” So, I accepted a regular commission and of course, next thing I knew 31 years went by. By then, I was a Brig. General; I had just been selected for major general in the late stages of the Reagan Administration. I turned it down, because I had 31 years in and I didn’t really come into the Marine Corps to be general per se and I had been offered a very good job in Chicago, Illinois, which I accepted. I went to Chicago for 14 years and ran a company in Chicago and then after 14 winters in Chicago, decided to come back to Tallahassee, so I have been here about three years now.

Taber: That's great, very interesting career. When you are a commissioned officer, tell me what that means? You are going to become an officer?

Sheridan: The term, "commissioned," applies when you become an officer. You are "commissioned" and become a "commissioned" officer". So sergeants and so forth that considered to be "non-commissioned" officers. It is just military terminology. The commissioning ceremony is very important. I just commissioned a couple of young men from FSU in the U.S. Marine Corps in the Presidents Box at the stadium and believe me, even though here were only two of them, it was quite, quite an assemblage, for two guys to be commissioned in the U.S. Marine Corps at Florida State University.

Taber: Describe your military training, before going to Vietnam. Were you enthusiastic about the challenges involved?

Sheridan: As a young officer, not knowing I was going to spend the rest of my life in the Marine Corps, so to speak, I volunteered for the infantry. Now, the Marine Corps is much like other services, there are branches. You can go into artillery, tanks or armor, supply, aviation; you can apply for flight training through jets, helicopters, and things like this. I figured, well, I am having a great time in the outdoors, so I actually volunteered for infantry. Next thing I know, I am out at Camp Pendleton, commanding a rifle platoon of about fifty young marines. By the time, that year and half tour was over, I was company commander, commanding a couple hundred marines, at Fox Company, Seventh Marines. By that time, I received orders to an aircraft carrier, which was as far away from the infantry as you can get. But we did have a ship's company landing party and in theory, we were supposed to be able to put ashore, not that I think an aircraft carrier ever would. I learned an awful lot about the navy, I stood "bridge watch" while we were underway, found out an awful lot about how the Navy operated.

Taber: And this was off the coast of Vietnam?

Sheridan: No, this was in the South China Sea. Vietnam had not really heated up at the particular point. As a matter of fact, it had heated down, because the French had pulled out in the 1950's, with the battle of Diem Bien Phu. And that time North and South Vietnam was a "simmering" area and no one really knew what was going to happen. Our concern at this time was the Chinese, who wanted to take Taiwan, and we were out there between China and Taiwan, patrolling back and forth, saying, "the seventh fleet says no, you can't do that." From there I went to a marines barracks in southern California as a guard officer, guarding all the nuclear weapons on the west coast of the United States, right in the middle of Long Beach, California. This was very tedious duty, and it required infantry skills, to make sure to provide proper security for all that stuff. From there, I went to Russian language school. Marine Corps has a thing about school and every officer has to "master" a foreign language. I don't mean, "learn" foreign language, like you might in college, mean "master" a foreign language. I had a couple years of Russian in college, so next thing I knew, I was in Russian Language School. From there, I went to Quantico and I was teaching second lieutenants in our basic course. The next

thing I know, it is 1965 , and we were landing marines in Da Nang.

Taber: And hat was the first military group in Vietnam?

Sheridan: Well, we had Army and Marine advisors in the early sixties and we had a couple of marine helicopter squads over there.

Taber: But, there were never any real battles at that time? Just advisors?

Sheridan: Well, you know, to take a step back. It is important to understand the context of where Vietnam in 1965, this really was the height of the “cold war”. We had almost gone to nuclear war with Russia, over missiles in Cuba. Things were about as tight as they could be. Our Army and Air Force, were in Europe, standing there looking down at all these Soviet armies and so forth. When the French pulled out of French Indo China, the Vietminh, who were the nationalists, literally took up arms and drove the French out, they divided the country in half, as they did with North and south Korea earlier. Now, they had divided the country in half, as they did with North and South Korea earlier. Now, they had North and South Vietnam. The French influence had produced an awful lot of Catholicism. So, most of the Catholics were people who didn’t want communism. These people voted with their feet and marched south and passed the DMZ and came into the northern portion of South Vietnam, around Hue City. Hue had in fact had a tremendous French influence and so, that area, the entire northern sector of South Vietnam was predominantly Catholic, where the rest of the country was Buddhist. Well, the North Vietnamese were not satisfied just to take over half the country, as they wanted the whole thing. So, they come up with the insurgency, they called it the Viet Cong. They started out as guerrillas, armed by the North Vietnamese, who later became very strong, what we called “main force” organizations, 4,000 to 5,000 men organizations, actually guerrillas who take over a city. So, by 1965, the Viet Cong had become so strong, it was that point, we had the first landing of American troops and they happened to land in the norther potion of south Vietnam, because we wanted to be sure to hold on to the air field in Da Nang. That’s why the U.S. Marine Corps ended up in the Northern sector of South Vietnam and the U.S. Army took over the other three sectors. South Vietnam has been divided into four military cores. And the Marines literally took over and ran the Northern core, where as the army too over the other three cores. So, the area we were in was predominantly a Catholic area. And the people hated the Viet Cong, and they hated the north Vietnamese, because they had been drive out and so forth. So, where we were stationed, the people were very popular as far as we were concerned.

Taber: They were eager to have you there?

Sheridan: Well, as the years went on, by about 14966, the Viet Cong, had pretty well been crushed. It only took about a year to smash these guys. There wasn’t much left of them, especially when they had to take on the strategic air command. Bombers, the U.S. Air Force, etc.

Taber: Did the Marines have aircraft as well?

Sheridan: Oh yes, Da Nang was just covered with Marine aircraft. There was a full Marine air wing —

Taber: Was there a Marine Corps military base in Da Nang?

Sheridan: That was where the Marine headquarters was. The third marine amphibious force, the Corps headquarters were located there. I personally didn't get to see much of Da Nang, when I came in; I was immediately shipped off to an infantry battalion, which was way up north in the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). By 1966, when I landed, the North Vietnamese realized that the only way they were going to be able to take Vietnam is if they sent regular army units in, so by then, you had tremendous infiltration of North Vietnamese Army units

Taber: And that's different from the Viet Cong/

Sheridan: The Viet Cong were guerrillas, basically living out of their packs. The North Vietnamese Army was very well equipped, with heavy weapons, mortars, and 152 mm Soviet guns, that they could shoot out of North Vietnam in South Vietnam with a range of about 15 miles.

Taber: So the Russians and the Chinese supplied them, is that correct? The weaponry?

Sheridan: Yes, and the joke was that we flew over there on Continental Air, with flight attendants taking care of us and so forth. The North Vietnamese soldiers had to walk all the way down on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, but the sum of the thing was that when you both got here, in the jungle, probably both were equally as well equipped, both sides.

T: Was there any experiences out in combat that stick in your mind, as memorable? Experiences with the men or officers that you worked with?

Sheridan: Well, there was a period, when I first went over there; I was with the second battalion, ninth Marines, and we were just going out on "sweeps" and chasing the Vietcong off into the jungle. We figured we could chase them out into the jungle and if they wanted to live out there, that was fine. They would starve to death and couldn't bother the people and so forth. Then, as the North Vietnamese came over the DMZ, they came up with these "forts" all along the DMZ. We (the Marines) had to occupy one of these called Con Tien, which was very famous, because it was taking about 500 artillery shells a day, from these Soviet 152 guns. Meanwhile, back in the United States, people were talking about Vietnam like it was a civil war.

Taber: Yes, the North against South —

Sheridan: The locals taking each other on, with peashooters. I can remember seeing our Navy

jets trying to take out these artillery pieces out there and getting shot down with SAM missiles, getting shot right out of the sky. This was very much conventional warfare, in every sense. Eighty two mm mortar round lands next to you, it didn't much matter if you flew over there or if the other guy walked down and carried it. At that particular point, you had two armies facing each other. At any one time, we could have started a war anywhere along the DMZ, if we sent out a rifle company; they would immediately run into that North Vietnamese battalion. Then if we sent in a Marine battalion, we would have been up against a North Vietnamese regiment. We were totally outnumbered in every respect. The only thing that kept these guys at bay and kept them off our backs was the close air support for the Air Force, Navy, and the Marine Corps and the B-52's from Guam. If they (North Vietnamese) tended to mass their forces, anytime they mass their forces, they were a target for these strikes from the B-52's. So, it was 500-pound bombs that pretty well kept them at bay. Our ability, even at night —

Taber: Would you call these guys into bomb certain areas, give them strategic plans on how to do that?

Sheridan: Yes, we had, in every U.S. Marine Infantry Battalion, we had at least two aviators, happened to control the air strikes around you. Even at that time, we had these wrapped back beacons, small beacons that you would lay out on the ground and would put out a signal. For instance a Navy or Marine aircraft could pick up from fifty miles away and could see exactly where you were. All you had to tell them is where you wanted them to bomb from. You just give coordinates and so forth. The guy up there, the bombardier, navigator, could plug all this into a computer and bomb wherever you needed them to. When they landed sometimes, even three, four hundred yards away, it sounded like it was right next to you. The noise and the humidity were such that —

Taber: Yes, that was something else I was going to ask you about — the weather? The monsoons?

Sheridan: Yes, there was something called the monsoons during the winter period. And it just rained and rained straight for three months. It never stopped raining and you could never dry out.

Taber: It made it hard to go out into the jungle and —

Sheridan: It made it hard on the North Vietnamese and it made it hard on us. Particularly when, by this time, most of the war period had moved up into the mountains. The mountains were triple canopied jungles, with all kinds of plants, vermin, snakes, tigers and anything else you really don't want anything to do with. And you are trying to fight a war in this monsoon rain, where it was just terrible.

Taber: Was there something called “trench foot?” We learned about this in class —

Sheridan: It had never happened to me, guess being from Florida. Do you know what dishpan hands are? You stick your hands in the water and the skin gets really wrinkled? Well, people's entire bodies would get like that — and we would have to medically evacuate them by helicopter and send them back some place where we could dry the guy out, dry out his uniform, equipment and then have to bring him back. Trying to rotate people back into the battalion was difficult —

Taber: Would they bring other troops in, to take their places? Or, rotate them out, bring them back?

Sheridan: No, it was just rotate. The average rifle company was supposed to have 200 men in it, and they were lucky to have 150 men. So if you too ten guys out, you would have 140 left.

Taber: Now, you were a captain over there? Or a major?

Sheridan: I started out as a captain.

Taber: How many men were underneath your regiment?

Sheridan: About 200, in a rifle company. That was what I was supposed to have. But I was lucky to have 125 at any one time. Each of the battalions had four companies and you know, you are supposed to have 1000 men in battalion, but you were lucky to have 500 to 600 men. Many times, we divided the battalions in half and just needed people in two places and you only had one battalion. Well, divided the battalion in half and the battalion commander took one half and the executive officer took the other half. So, I made Major commander about half way through my tour. I didn't even know I had been selected or promoted —

Taber: Really? You were probably too busy —

Sheridan: My regimental commander flew in once and said, "Sheridan, I thought you were a major?" I said, "Sir?" And he replied, "Yeah, your list came in about a month ago, let me check and call you back." And then he called me back and said, "Yes, you are a major!" I told him just to make sure the paymaster knows this. So, at that point, I wasn't carrying around any major's oak leaves.

Taber: That's the insignia?

Sheridan: Yes, nobody had any oak leaves. The regimental chaplain had some really salt ones and he gave them to me. After that, I became the battalion's operations officer (S-3) and I stayed with the battalion for a while until the spring of 1967 until one of our battalions had a tremendous amount of casualties and I was set up to take command of the first battalion force Marines. Even though, I was pretty much a random major, they just didn't have any Lt. Colonels lying around. I stayed with battalion, until a very senior major came in and we decided he was the battalion commander. Then we divided the battalion up and he took half of the battalion and I

took the other half under command, for various operations reasons.

Taber: Where was this battalion located? Da Nang?

Sheridan: My job was to take some companies of Marines and some light artillery and probe our way westward from Hue City, out towards the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Our job was to probe out there and find out what the enemy was doing in Vietnam and so forth. It was very interesting experience, because we came to find that we were surrounded most of the time by the 6th North Vietnamese Regiment and they would never attack us.

Taber: Why do you think that was?

Sheridan: I don't know. The general came down and asked that one day. I was thankful because they outnumbered us 100 to 1. I think at the time, they knew, they envisioned that sooner or later they would attack Hue and they didn't want to give away any of their positions west. IF we engaged them, even with a small unit, there would be an awful lot of bombing and things like this so, we probed way out west —

Taber: How far west did you go?

Sheridan: Almost, as far as our supply lines would let us go. And we would have small skirmishes with them. They (North Vietnamese Army) would always break contact and pull back, which I was always thankful for.

Taber: Do you think that was their military strategy? I've read many books about Vietnam and the strategy had been to pull back, then engage the enemy with skirmishes, then wait out the enemy —

Sheridan: A year later, although I was a Marine officer, I was teaching at West Point, you had, what you called the TET Offensive. The North Vietnamese Regiment attacked the city of Hue from the west and got inside the city of Hue and of course had to be repulsed by the fifth Marines. It was a terrible battle because once the North Vietnamese got inside the city of Hue, it was a walled city with canals, walls and temples. All these ancient things were hard to break through. In the course of getting in there, they killed about 6000 South Vietnamese. That's what the reports said. Their intent, was obviously to lay and wait until they could attack Hue City. Now, at that particular point, they were pretty much destroyed, the North Vietnamese regiment and most of the Viet Cong throughout South Vietnam were destroyed. The popular forces and regional forces we had trained stood their ground very well during TET and as the Viet Cong came after them, they massacred them and there wasn't much left of the Viet Cong. The North Vietnamese also took very heavy casualties. IT was reported in the newspapers and the press back here as a huge defeat for the Americans, because someone had said the war was over. WE have more idiots who think wars are over with, for whatever political reasons, an election or something. And they had been home for Christmas sort of a thing, and then we had the TET

offensive. Now, the fact that we mashed them during the TET offensive, didn't seem to make that much of difference to the press, as the fact that there was a TET offensive.

Taber: Right, that was news in itself —

Sheridan: After that, the war was pretty much over. After the TET offensive, there were battles and so forth. There wasn't much the North Vietnamese Army could do, and the Viet Cong had been decimated. I would have said, by that particular point, in 1972, the North Vietnamese attacked, came across the DMZ with three armored divisions and pictures of them when they took Saigon when they had tanks. That is a long way from Hanoi!

Taber: Well, I remember being in high school and watchin television, seeing people trying to get out of the country and of the roof f the U.S. embassy.

Sheridan: Well, see we had pulled out and been gone for years, except for advisors.

Taber: I don't remember hearing a whole lot about battles and skirmishes during the 70's in Vietnam. It seemed more like a 60's war.

Sheridan: It was, but some of the most fascinating things that happened, was when our advisors, fighting with the South Vietnamese, held off these armored divisions around Quant Tri, staggering stories of heroism. But by then, no one wanted to hear about it in the United States, because no ne wanted to hear about ti. By 1972, we had guys just hanging on by their nails, trying to —

Taber: How did it make you feel, what kind of thoughts went through your mind, when 1973 happened and our country all pulled out. Did you think, "Gee, could we have had a different military strategy?"

Sheridan: I would say there is a lesson learned for the military after Vietnam. It is, "You better go in fast, smash them and get out." Well, unfortunately, they didn't learn that in Iraq or Afghanistan. The first Gulf War was pretty much run the way the military would runt he war, not the way the politicians would run the war. Go over there with massive strength, 5000 people, smash them and go home. There you go, it's all back in your bag. With Vietnam, just drug on and on and on. Also, we were fighting the war with draftees, 18 and 19 year old kids who literally didn't volunteer. I was fortunate that all the Marines I served with volunteered, with the exception of one young man that was drafted.

Taber: Was there a difference in attitude between draftees and volunteers?

Sheridan: Yes, my battalion was all volunteers. They had consciously joined the Marines. We didn't tolerate a whole lot of excuses from them, because they were regulars. That is not to take anything away from the regular Army, which was full of draftees. They were damn fine

American soldiers, but didn't ask to be there.

Taber: It's like anyone who does a job, some good, some bad. Do you think Marines have the best training, of any of the military forces?

Sheridan: I would say today, most of the military is all on par, although the boot camp might not be as tough as U.S. Marine Corps boot camp. The rest of training in the U.S. Army, can't take anything away from the third infantry division or 101st mobile airborne, damn fine American soldiers.

Taber: How did you feel coming back to the states after your Vietnam tour?

Sheridan: I didn't realize the amount of anti-war fervor that existed. I wasn't reading much of anything over there. I met my wife over in Hawaii for some R and R and that was it. I came back to Tallahassee because my wife and kids were here and my wife Nancy was getting her masters degree at Florida State. I was rather shocked at the University, the churches and the anti-war attitude. I was married at the First Presbyterian Church in Tallahassee. My in-laws took me to that same church the first Sunday I was back from my tour, and I weighed maybe 160, lost a lot of weight from the climate, etc. There is some young minister up there, referring to all of us as "baby killers." I am thinking what is this guy talking about? The troops that I saw, they would kill a North Vietnamese soldier, but never hurt a civilian. I don't know how many times we would take sniper fire from a village but not shoot back, cause we knew there were women and children. We just lay there and took fire for hours, because we can't indiscriminately open fire on something like that. There were some bad scenes over there, like Mai Lai, I guess these troops just reached the total absolute frustration where they went nuts killing people —

Taber: Weren't there instances where civilians would come up them (US soldiers) with bombs strapped to them. They weren't sure who the enemy was —

Sheridan: We had less of that problem where we were. Most of the area where we were was a free fire area. Most of the people had been moved out. Most of the areas were predominantly Catholic and reasonably nice to us. The south Vietnamese units up there, the ARVN —

Taber: I was going to ask you what you thought about the South Vietnamese Army (ARVN)?

Sheridan: They were outstanding and a couple of reaction outfits, absolute fantastic. Highly trained, with all U.S. Army advisors. I was very impressed with ARVN units we went out with. They spoke Vietnamese and helped us with reading signs. It was their country and they were fighting for their country. Many of their chaplains were Catholic and very different in the Buddhist areas.

Taber: Were there a lot of religious problems in Vietnam too. They wanted their freedom to practice whatever religion they wanted, right?

Sheridan: Yes, most places where there are problems in the world, it's because there are tribes. We see that today in Iraq, between the Shiites and Kurds. There are sects too, with the Shiites. Which I just call tribalism. It's the Hatfield's and the McCoy's, we're going to get even, kill each other. IT's just going on and on. Africa is so rampant with this type of thing too. American Indian tribes too. But if the white man had never shown up, then the American Indians would have ended up killing each other just because of the tribal warfare that was going on at the time —

Taber: Have any final thoughts on the Vietnam War itself, maybe personalities, friendships, etc.

Sheridan: No questions about it, the camaraderie, the friendships, you know. The sense of humor, the unbelievable sense of humor of these guys. You would be going through a terrible, terrible situation and within a matter of minutes a couple of guys would be joking and rapping and having the best time. This sense of humor carried us through some really tough times.

Taber: Laughter is the best medicine. Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with me and want to make sure it is okay to record this session. I appreciate your help and assistance. We appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.

Sheridan: Sure. If it's worth anything.

END