

**Interviewee:** Collander, Frank  
**Interviewer:** Brian Seidel  
**Date of interview:** March 10, 2006  
**Category:** Vietnam  
**Status:** Open  
**Tape location:** Box #53

**Seidel:** Alright Frank, why don't you start off by telling me when you got started in the military and why you joined the military?

**Collander:** I enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1945, the why is that my parents had been divorced and this came as quite a shock to me and I felt that if I didn't do something with my life I was gonna get all screwed up. I had been an A student and had suddenly started skipping school and just being a real badass. So in order to keep myself from getting into deep trouble I enlisted in the Marine Corps. I did 2 years as a sea going marine aboard a ship, a navy ship, and then I got out and went back to school and was a sophomore at Northeastern University when the Korean War came along and I was recalled active duty and stayed in at that time until I retired in 1971.

**Seidel:** So your first experience with actual war was the Korean War? What rank did you hold when you entered the Korean War?

**Collander:** The first time I was a Sergeant and landed at Inchon on September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1950. Was wounded sent back to the states. Went on recruiting duty in Boston after I got out of the hospital and as a result of activities on my first tour they made me a second lieutenant, sent me to basic school at Quantico and then I went back to Korea for a full tour, a full 13 month tour as a rifle platoon commander.

**Seidel:** And after Korea, after the war had ended you still held second lieutenant rank?

**Collander:** No, after the war was over I made first lieutenant, then captain I just decided to stay in I liked it.

**Seidel:** And how were your experiences in Korea?

**Collander:** Scary.

**Seidel:** Scary?

**Collander:** Yea, I was a rifle platoon commander in a static situation and most of the activity was patrolling. We'd go out ohh about 5-600 yards in front of the line and once in a while we'd make contact and get in a fire fight, and I can remember a couple times we were probed, the Chinese probed us and we had to fight them off but like everything else your scared but you live

with it

**Seidel:** Yeah, How was the weather?

**Collander:** Well I was there for a whole year. Summer time was as hot as could be, a lot like Sarasota and the winter time was like Boston, cold, snowy

**Seidel:** And did you find that the weather in the winter became a difficulty for the fighting and the men's morale?

**Collander:** No, We didn't...I never had any morale problems I was very lucky with the people I had assigned to me. Everybody was there because they were there and you just made the best of it.

**Seidel:** You know in a lot of books they talk about how Marines and soldiers in general really get down on their luck in between the brief spurts of combat that they participate in, do you feel that that holds true, that when your not fighting the boredom is incredibly difficult to deal with?

**Collander:** No, not really because you have always go incoming to worry about or be concerned about. Not really boredom, I don't...time, time, time goes very slowly but I wouldn't call it boredom because you've got too many things to be concerned about to be bored

**Seidel:** That's for sure. When was the first time you heard about Vietnam, the Vietnam War or any of the activities happening over in Indochina?

**Collander:** I believe it was in 1960, 1960 I guess. I was at Camp Pendleton, California I was a captain, company commander and we were about to go to Okinawa and we had a briefing, and I remember the guys name Lt. Colonel Wilkinson, who had just come back from Southeast Asia we went to Okinawa and then our battalion was airlifted out, out of uhh Okinawa to go to the Philippines to stand by to go into Laos.

**Seidel:** To go into Laos?

**Collander:** Uh huh

**Seidel:** You launched initial operations from Laos?

**Collander:** No, No, No we were prepared to go in, prepared...

**Seidel:** Ohh, Ok

**Collander:** But, they never put us in, but we stayed in the Philippines for about 90, 90 to 100 days and during that time I had the opportunity to go into Laos on a reconnaissance, that was my

first, well the briefing and then the uhh trip into Laos, we knew the stuff was going to hit the fan and then when I went back to the states I made Major and I was assigned to special operations, and went back, went into Vietnam for the first time in 1964. We had a squadron of helicopters supporting the Vietnamese and I was in charge of them, and that's when I made my first trip into Vietnam and stayed about 3 months that time.

**Seidel:** How did you feel about the jungle when you made your first recon mission in Laos, did you feel that the jungle was really dense, thick?

**Collander:** Ohh god yes.

**Seidel:** Very hard to see through?

**Collander:** Ohh yea, hard to see through, hard to walk through, just uhh a terrible place to fight a war.

**Seidel:** It was really bad bush?

**Collander:** Ohh yea

**Seidel:** So you said that you went in in 1964 with helicopters that were flying support for the ARVN troops?

**Collander:** A marine helicopter squadron was in there in support of the south Vietnamese army and they had a base in Danang, outside Danang, in an old French army camp and I went over there to observe, well to observe and to participate in special operations.

**Seidel:** Special operations stuff...How did you feel the South Vietnamese army, the ARVN compared to the United States military?

**Collander:** There is no question, they were far inferior, it was ridiculous, but again the individual soldier was probably, if he had had the proper motivation and training would have probably been equally as good as ours, everything was political in the ARVN the uhh, I can remember one occasion where the uhh, where a village was under the control of the Vietcong, a whole area was under the control of the Vietcong for a long time and uhh the ARVN was able to drive them out with American advisors assistance, the first thing the South...South Vietnamese government did was send in the tax collectors to collect the taxes from the people that they hadn't paid in two years. Well how much support do you think the South Vietnamese government was going to get from those people? It was stupid.

**Seidel:** Was that part of the Strategic Hamlet program then?

**Collander:** That came on after, that was created to prevent that type of activity

**Seidel:** To prevent?

**Collander:** The Viet Cong from taking over

**Seidel:** From taking the villages back and you said that you were a Captain at this time

**Collander:** Well, no in 64 I was a Major

**Seidel:** And you were involved in special operations? Did you do the day to day staff operations or were you a field operative?

**Collander:** A little bit of both, planning and execution

**Seidel:** Did you ever go up against the Vietcong or the NVA head to head?

**Collander:** NVA, yea, but that was later on in 1968 when I was a battalion commander, we met with them a bunch of times

**Seidel:** Yea, Im sure you did. That's what it was all about. Ok well go back to 64 then. You said the base was outside of Danang, how did you feel about the civilian presence outside of Danang, did they appreciate the limited amount of Americans that were there?

**Collander:** Well in Danang they certainly did because they wanted the American money, they were the hookers and the tattoo shops and the souvenir shops

**Seidel:** Did you feel like when you walked out into the country side, in order to liberate a village, do you feel like the villagers appreciated the liberation?

**Collander:** That's tough to say Brian, tough to say, as long as the Vietcong weren't bothering them other than taking their food and making them hide, it tough to say

**Seidel:** What happened in 1965?

**Collander:** That's when the Marines landed in March

**Seidel:** And so once the Marines officially landed, their first job was to hold an airfield...

**Collander:** At Danang

**Seidel:** At Danang, right, were you involved with that at all?

**Collander:** No I was back in the states

**Seidel:** Ohh you came back to the states?

**Collander:** Yea

**Seidel:** In 64 you did your stint in Vietnam, then you came back to the states?

**Collander:** Yea I was stationed in Washington

**Seidel:** You had a desk job?

**Collander:** Yea

**Seidel:** When did you return to Vietnam?

**Collander:** In 1968, I returned to Vietnam, I was a Lt. Colonel by then and was a battalion commander

**Seidel:** And you said that in 1968 you started to have your first head to head combat...

**Collander:** Well as a battalion commander...

**Seidel:** Yes as a battalion commander, how did you feel about the fighting strength and fighting style of the VC?

**Collander:** Well the ones that we bumped into were retreating north and I didn't have much...uhh most of them were young kids, and they just wanted to get back north and we were in a position to stop them

**Seidel:** and you did stop them?

**Collander:** Yea, pretty much...

**Seidel:** Yea pretty much, Ok...How did you feel about their age in relation to the age of your own soldiers?

**Collander:** I think some of them might have been a little younger, but again you cant tell by looking at an Asian, there ages are very hard to discern, they were scared...scared to death

**Seidel:** They were scared of you because of your numbers?

**Collander:** No I think they were scared not just because of the numbers, they had been down south a while and were trying to get back north and uhh we had been placed in position to stop them and did

**Seidel:** You did stop them?

**Collander:** Well a lot of them...

**Seidel:** That's good. Ok How many people were you in charge of as a Lt. Colonel?

**Collander:** Uhh a battalion is about 1100 men, and at times you have attachments like uhh a platoon of tanks, Id say between 11-1200.

**Seidel:** 11 to 1200 men. Were you ever choppered in to actual firefights, were you on sight for the majority of the firefights?

**Collander:** Ohh yea

**Seidel:** Or did you do the majority of your work in what is known as the rear?

**Collander:** No, No In the 3<sup>rd</sup> division under the command of Major General Davis there was no rear for battalions, there was a rear way back where you had a base camp, where the admit went, where people went when they were going to or coming from a hospital, they were back there, but for the most part I was in the field, with my exec, my operations officer, my intelligence officer, my personnel officer, my logistics officer would be back in the rear. But we were self sufficient, we'd go out for a month...choppers would come in take us here and we operate in the bush for as long as a month. Get re-supplied by air and by the time the month was over, we be pretty dirty. I remember another time... Im pretty sure it was September 15<sup>th</sup>...September 15<sup>th</sup>, 1968, my battalion and another were landed in the demilitarized zone, right smack dab in the middle of it and uhh...man they were just kicking the crap out of us...or at least trying to with artillery and mortars and that's when we maneuvered into the path of the incoming rounds...it was uhh...it was hairy.

**Seidel:** Absolutely, sounds hairy. So the DMZ was where you were choppered into and you took a lot of incoming rounds, artillery rounds?

**Collander:** Artillery and mortar yea...

**Seidel:** What did you think of the weapons you were fighting against they were mostly soviet supplied is that correct, so AK-47's and the like, what did they have and were firing at you?

**Collander:** SKS, I don't know what they were firing at me I mean rifle and small arms is all I can deal with...they had a recoilless...I think it was about a 76...our recoilless were 106's there's was a 76

**Seidel:** What is a recoilless rifle?

**Collander:** A recoilless rifle...is uhh...well the recoil goes out the ass end (makes gesture) so that the tube stays where it is and as its detonated the force goes out the rear end...

**Seidel:** It's a rocket launcher...

**Collander:** Exactly...

**Seidel:** Ok, So in 1968 you cut those guys off and after that you would be choppered out of that area into another area?

**Collander:** Ohh yea

**Seidel:** You slept in the bush...dug a foxhole at night?

**Collander:** Ohh yea...

**Seidel:** I find that interesting...

**Collander:** Sometimes two or three times a day

**Seidel:** Because you didn't want them to zero in on you?

**Collander:** Well, one of the basic principles is whenever you stop...dig, you don't just stop and wait, many times you'd get whole half dug...and whoop you gotta go, lot of half dug holes around

**Seidel:** How old were you when you were fighting right there?

**Collander:** 40 I guess...40 or 39

**Seidel:** What did you think of the helicopters used to move you in and out of the areas?

**Collander:** Ohh they were wonderful

**Seidel:** Do you think that really helped the war effort in Vietnam?

**Collander:** Ohh god yes

**Seidel:** What about the pilots, did you feel they were more than qualified?

**Collander:** Ohh absolutely

**Seidel:** Fantastic?

**Collander:** Yeah, good guys

**Seidel:** Did you come back to the states after 1968, prior to retirement?

**Collander:** Ohh yea, I came back in 1969 and was stationed in Panama

**Seidel:** You were stationed in Panama?

**Collander:** Yea

**Seidel:** While the war was going on?

**Collander:** While the Vietnam War was going on? Yes. Everybody did...a full tour was 13 months and uhh I had been there three times. A quarter tour, a half tour and then a full tour, so I had paid my dues.

**Seidel:** And that was the last time you were there?

**Collander:** Yea

**Seidel:** You left Vietnam in?

**Collander:** 69

**Seidel:** When you returned back to the states how did you feel about the anti-war movement?

**Collander:** I didn't pay much attention to it to tell you the truth. My first involvement with the anti-war movement was after I retired. I retired in 71' and was appointed commissioner of Highway Safety for Massachusetts and my office was right down the street from the state house and that's when Mr. John Kerry was...and his Vietnam Veterans against the war were making a big splash, that's when I first came involved with the anti-war movement.

**Seidel:** Back to Vietnam a little bit more...I just want to know a little bit more about the weather in Vietnam, the climate. Did you find that the climate...you had said in Korea the climate was bad, hot and cold...

**Collander:** Vietnam was mainly hot, it got I mean there wasn't any snow uhh but man when it got hot...to this day I don't wear a tee shirt, ever. Well except to go to bed at night. I never wear one under another shirt because I feel too constricted by it. You wore your boots, socks, trousers, shirt and a flak jacket, no underwear. Too hot. And sometimes you would not wear a shirt and just wear a flak jacket.

**Seidel:** So you had a nice tan?

**Collander:** Yeah...(Laughs)

**Seidel:** What did you feel about the weapons the Americans were using? Because you entered the war in the early stages, and the marines were still being issued M-14's at that time weren't they?

**Collander:** Yeah, I was intimately involved in the M16 versus the M14 there was a...the M16 was invented by a guy named Gene Stoner, as the Colt AR...15 the Armalite 15 and the Marine Corps was fighting against...it was a political move to switch from the M14 to the M16's but uhh this Eugene Stoner had developed a system of weapons, all of them were .223 I mean same round but uhh it was a carbine, a rifle, and a machine gun all interchangeable parts. So, haha when a friend of mine Pete Wickwire was his name, when the M16 were first introduced in Vietnam they had a lot of problems with it. Ill get to why in a moment. But, uhh Pete Wickwire was quoted on I don't know which, one of the national television shows saying "these god damn rifles were like 'Matty Matel's'". Well that just shook Washington up, they went crazy. Well my...I don't want to say my patron...but the guy I served with and was close to was General Wall. Who was then three star and was in Vietnam for a couple of years, he was back in Washington. I can remember I get a call at home about ten o'clock and he was on his way cross country and they wanted me to run a test on the M16 to see what the hell the story was. So I was in charge of this test of the M16 because what happened was when the weapon was designed the rounds were designed to use a extruded propellant. In other words, molten powder would be poured into the shell, where it would harden, not by hand of course, and when the round was fired there would be a minimum of smoke and carbon. Well in its wisdom, what the United States Army decided was well we have all of this ball ammunition. Now ball ammunition is little tiny balls of black powder, well supposedly they had 50 years supply of it left over in arsenals. Some of it going back to WWI. At any rate, that's what they started using in the shell casing as a propellant. Well the weapon was not designed to use that stuff, so the weapon in Vietnam at the time was intermingled. So that's why thee damn things were jamming all the time, cause there was so much carbon and junk coming from this ball ammunition.

**Seidel:** So a lot of soldiers got killed because...

**Collander:** Ohh I wouldn't say that

**Seidel:** Well rifles would jam in the field and they you would have to strip them and clean them...why did we make this sort of recycling move? We used this ball ammunition when we should have used this other ammunition?

**Collander:** Right, the weapon was designed to be used with the extruded propellant and some bureaucrat decided that we've got all of this old ball ammunition, all of this old black powder, in all these arsenals lets use that all up. Dumb. So the weapon had to be redesigned again with the bigger ports, that was a dumb thing to do but that's what happened.

**Seidel:** How did the lightweight M16 compare accuracy wise, and weight wise to the M14?

**Collander:** It's a lot lighter...but, it doesn't have the range. But again the propellant, the slug in the M16 is...well in a regular .30 caliber round you get hit in the arm, the slug is gonna go through it. You get hit in the arm with an M16. The round, propellant and slug is gonna tumble and that's what causes all the problems. It shot, and caused trauma as apposed to a slug going through your arm, this round bounced around in your arm, tearing your arm to bits, the shock and the trauma is what gets people.

**Seidel:** During your tour in Vietnam did you see a lot of wounded soldiers?

**Collander:** Yea

**Seidel:** A lot of serious injuries?

**Collander:** Yea

**Seidel:** Were most of them from firefights or from land mines, booby traps?

**Collander:** I'd say the worst ones were from incoming. Artillery or mortars.

**Seidel:** That does the most damage?

**Collander:** Yea

**Seidel:** Because of the shrapnel?

**Collander:** Right

**Seidel:** There's really no way to get away from that is there.

**Collander:** Just dig a big hole.

**Seidel:** Just hide in the hole...Did you feel the flak jacket you were wearing was effective?

**Collander:** Ohh god yes, I first started wearing a flak jacket in Korea, funny story, when you hear all of this stuff about flak jackets in Iraq, the ideal soldier as far as a soldier is concerned the ideal situation is for him to be completely in a flak jacket nothing exposed. But, when I was in Korea they issued us flak jackets, they had been around 6 months. Then they came out with these things they were like diapers, that you would put on that supposedly would protect your...nobody would use them. They restricted your movement and they were ridiculous. But, I'm a firm believer in flak jackets.

**Seidel:** Do you feel that the United States in entering Vietnam made a mistake?

**Collander:** I don't know...I don't know. That's Monday morning quarterback. You gotta remember I was a regular officer and my job, my oath was to support the constitution, and obey the orders of the president of the United States, period.

**Seidel:** Being a Korean war veteran you had fought against communist forces before?

**Collander:** Whether they were communist or whatever they were, they were the enemy and your fighting for your country.

**Seidel:** Do you think we lost the war in Vietnam, would you say we lost?

**Collander:** Well we didn't win. But, I'm not sure we lost. Well we didn't win, we didn't win in Korea either.

**Seidel:** We didn't?

**Collander:** No there still...there

**Seidel:** Wasn't the point to only save South Korea?

**Collander:** No, we were there to expel the Communist forces but, uh North Korea is still there.

END