

Interviewee: Shepherd, Johnnie L.
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Boyd: Colonel Shepherd, if you could just beginning for me, when and where were you born and if you could just go into your experiences growing up.

Shepherd: I was born in March 8th of 1946 in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. I grew up in Hattiesburg, but, again, the Korean War, my father was a National Guard member and he got activated and subsequently he stayed in the military until he did in 1960. During that course, we were able to deploy with him to Germany and spend two years in Germany where I was in elementary school in the 1954 to '56 period. I graduated from Hattiesburg High School in 1964, the spring of 1964, and attended the University of Southern Mississippi for one quarter but they didn't teach deer hunting, so I quit and joined the Army. So I became a service member of the United States Army in January – January the 15th, 1965 – and stayed almost thirty four years. It was just the right thing for me.

Boyd: So college just wasn't your cup of tea at the time?

Shepherd: Unless they changed their schedule to meet mine. Teach deer hunting and squirrel hunting and rabbit hunting and dove shooting, which is the values which young Mississippi boys grew up with. I grew up with guns, and being in the field hunting and so forth. Sao even though my dad died at an early age, my neighbors father became more or less responsible for me, and they were woodsmen and we did a lot of hunting and fishing and so forth. So I was very accustomed to going out and stealthily searching out game, shooting straight (as much as anybody can). And so that was kind of my growing up. Most of my family are country folk, around the Hattiesburg area. My family, because of the circumstances, ended up being pretty much city folk. We lived in the city proper. Had an excellent education, even though at that time, remember – and this is important, too, overall, in context of what we're going to be discussing – the South was not integrated. It was segregated. In my elementary years in Hattiesburg and my junior high and highschool, I never attended school with a black person. It was a segregated school system, equal but separate. So you have a young Mississippi boy growing up in that type of environment, entering the Army, and of course the Army is mixed races. And I'll pause on that and let you ask the next question. [Chuckles]

Boyd: Well, I just wanted to go back actually to your two years in Germany.

Shepherd: As a child, and we were in Kieserschlager, Germany. And this was after World War II, very important to recognize that we were pretty much an army of occupation. My dad was a

member of an army – U.S. Army of Occupation, as it were – in Germany at that time. He was a supply sergeant, medical supplies, and Kieserschlagen was a big depot area where they had lots of warehouse and different locations for storage of various types of war materials, and he handled medical supplies. At that time, France, of course, was to the west, a short distance to the west, and we had troops in France as well. (Subsequently, that becomes another story, but not relevant for anything for this interview). But yeah, just growing up, went through, I think, second, third, into the fourth grade, and then came back to Hattiesburg from there.

Boyd: Now did your dad teach you shooting?

Shepherd: No, you know, interestingly, I only went hunting that I can recall with my dad one time, and he taught me how to twist a rabbit out of a hollow tree trunk. The dogs had run a rabbit up a tree trunk and there's technique – my dad is an old country boy, didn't have a lot of education, but he could take what we call a blackvine or a briar, you know one of these big briars about as big as your little finger. He broke off a piece and he twisted it up into the stump and got it into the rabbit's hair and then pulled the rabbit out. And then he grabbed the rabbit's legs as it came out – it was a big cane cutter rabbit, a large rabbit – he took it and hit it against the tree, hit the head against the tree and killed it. But my dad was of that type. You're talking about truly country folk, pretty much, by way of all my family's background, and very handy. They were skilled at survival and crafts such as we're describing. He talked about being able to catch fish by laying on the bank of river and putting your hands into the water and letting your hands acclimate to the water, and you just wiggle your fingers and you can catch fish. You can come under a catfish or something and throw it up on the bank, you know. He had some skills about him.

Boyd: So he had very good wilderness skills?

Shepherd: Oh, indeed, indeed. Those type things probably only a few old people know about these days. Not much written about that, you know. That was my dad. And then my best friend's father, who is just absolutely a hero in my book. I think, Jess, one of the things that was really interesting and stands out about my upbringing was: when I was a boy running around playing cowboys and Indians and army and all the things that little boys did, the old veterans of that day of World War II (which weren't old at the time, we were very young) they talked about how they had wished they had stayed in the military, because then they would have been retired and had had some benefits. And you know, even as a young boy, those type of just being aside show the importance what little children hear. I heard what they were saying and somehow it registered in my mind that they really weren't happy as they could have been had they done something else, which was available to them but they chose not to. They changed their life. They chose not to be in the service. They chose to be civilians and they returned to the community. He happened to be a peddler, as it were. He went around to the various little stores and he had little racks of things. His car was always full of the most interesting things, you know, little novelties of different sorts. And he peddled novelties to these gas stations and stores, and then he would talk though with other men about "wish I had stayed in the army." You know, "I'd have medical benefits",

“I’d have a retirement now”, “wouldn’t have to work so hard, I could do this, but I’d have something to fall back on.” Those type of little conversations, exchanges, which were more than once or twice or three time, but enough to be memorable in an adult’s mind this late in life, did register about some of the benefits of being in the service. There’re values that stuck with me, and I think probably one of the contributing factors for me wanting to stay in the military, you know.

Boyd: Was it also a contributing factor to kind of why you joined?

Shepherd: Oh indeed. The real reason why I joined is a thing called the Green Berets. My brother-in-law was one of the forming members of the Green Berets. Back in 1954 when the U.S. Special Forces (as we know them today) were gone, Lou Falkenberry, my brother-in-law, was an E-5 and he was selected to go in to this very early organization, and subsequently he made a career, the latter part of his career stages, in Special Forces and was a Sergeant Major. He was kind of, if you will, the H. R. Sergeant Major for Special Forces. He’d be in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, one year, and then the next year he’d be in Vietnam. Then, he’d be back at Fort Bragg and back to Vietnam every other year. And there was another sergeant major that alternated with him, so between the two of them one of them was in Vietnam and one was back at the headquarters of U.S. Army Special Forces at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. So Lou Falkenberry was my inspiration. So I did have a military connection in the sense that my dad was deceased but had been brought into the military and through the ‘50s was in the military, and died in ‘60; then, Lou Falkenberry, my brother-in-law, who was a sergeant major and a professional man in the military, he had all these first-hand experiences from Vietnam as a Special Forces soldier. So those were my two inspiring factors for joining the military.

Boyd: So you joined when?

Shepherd: January 15th, 1965. The recruiter told me I was a disgruntled freshmen, but the recruiter told me “boy, your scores were great!” You know, “you can be anything you want to be, what do you want to be?” And I said, “I want to be Airborne Infantry Special Forces.” He said, “But you have good scores, you can be anything you want to be. What do you want to be?” And I said, “Sergeant, I want to be Airborne Infantry Special Forces.” He said, “well, okay, can’t talk him out of it.” I had very good scores in terms of the various tests that were given and my option was to be infantry. There’s a beauty about infantry. It’s a tough life, and I love it! It’s woody. It’s shooting. It’s playing with guns and things that go “bang.”

Boyd: So you kind of thought of the play army kind of thing?

Shepherd: Yeah, it was kind of play army to me. And, too, I had a brother-in-law that was in the business, you know, although I did not see him very much, if at all for awhile.

The sergeant at the recruiting station told me that I could join and that he would guarantee me infantry (the easiest thing to get) if I could do all the physical. He wouldn’t guarantee, but he said if you can do all the physical things and everything and don’t get hurt, you

can be in Airborne. He said, "I can get you that far on the contract, but I can't get you into Special Forces. You'll have to work that out on your own." What he didn't tell me is you had to be twenty-one years old, and I was eighteen. And so, in any case, here I am a young man, joining the army, truly not knowing what I was getting into, but having some idea. So that all happened in January of '65.

Boyd: Also, at this time period there was the assassination of John F. Kennedy in '63, so you have all this political stuff going on. Did you have any political memories from this?

Shepherd: Yes, I do. Let's back up to that one and then let's back even further up. But since you brought Kennedy up, it's important to recognize and I don't think a lot of people write about this: when Kennedy was assassinated it was hailed as a wonderful thing in a large part of the South. Kennedy was a Catholic, and the South wasn't. At least my home town wasn't. We had a Catholic church that had its own school system, pretty much it was its own little clan within Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

Boyd: It's mostly Baptist and Methodist.

Shepherd: Mostly Baptist and Methodist and Christian and so forth, you know. That's your preponderates, but to have these ritualists, you know, with the black capes of the nuns and the priest and all the idea and stuff that was kind of different. It was not out of place, but it wasn't wholly accepted in place, within the community and so forth that I could recognize. I had a good friend, Butch Peterson, who was a Catholic, but he attended regular elementary school and he and I went through schools together and all that. Religion was never the issue, but let me say when Kennedy was assassinated I was in high school. I was just on lunch break. We were in the cafeteria and the news came across and it was broadcast on the loud speaker that President Kennedy had been shot, and subsequently that he had died. The teachers became so upset they couldn't eat. They were throwing-up. They were sick. They were crying. And the students were celebrating, standing on the tables saying "yea!"

Boyd: Really?

Shepherd: The dynamic is a horrific scene of just what values were going on the minds of young people back in that day in time. This is '63, I think. And so I recorded that, kind of observed that and everything. I didn't say yahoo 'cause I didn't know much about it. But I was interested to follow up that evening to find out what was going on when I got home, and of course there was black-and-white TV then. We didn't have color, not in Hattiesburg anyway. Not in my family, we were fortunate to have a TV. The Kennedy assassination was a tragedy for the nation. On the other hand, how it was received within the nation was mixed emotions, mixed outcries, and so forth. Educated people recognized the seriousness of it. Us rednecks probably didn't quite recognize the full seriousness of it and to some extent or another were probably happy about it.

Boyd: Do you think it was also kind of an age thing? You know, you said you're teachers were more upset than the students.

Shepherd: Indeed. I think students sometimes reflect a little bit of family values, to some extent or another. Things they grew up around hearing and they're influenced by the hearing of certain things. And they form in their formative years certain opinions that are not so much their opinions as it is the opinions of others, as they have observed and listened and heard and are affected by those comments.

Now Kennedy was a tragedy in the '60s. It's on the back side of Bay of Pigs and the Cuban Missile Crisis. And you can see where our military was focused back then. You as you walk backwards (and it is very important to do that, too) you walk backward through the '60s, you see the importance of the nuclear issue, the nuclear arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States and the free world. That they got a satellite in late '57 or so, Sputnik, up into the air but it was a frightening thing. We saw it at night go over. You know, we saw this globe. You've seen them before.

Boyd: I've seen movies where they reenact the moving of the Sputnik where everybody stands out side and looks up and waits for it.

Shepherd: It's frightening really, because you don't know what the implications of that are. Back then, no one really knew where nuclear was going and where space was leading, so there was so much uncertainty and fear. People dug big bomb shelters and things. I don't know if you know about that. Not all people, some people reacted that way to the stress of thought along the lines of the nuclear confrontation and so forth. The Cuban Missile Crisis brought that all to the forefront. And then they start the assault and all that, and through the 70s they come up with the Strategic Arms Limitations Talks.

But even walking backwards from there, and maybe let's do this. Let's jump in to the back of World War II, which seems to me this is relevant because I think even as a child because I had a father who had served in the military and because that a brother-in-law who was very influential in my life in the military. And my brother had gone into the military for the Korean War. I was a little more focused on the military than other people, perhaps, who didn't have the benefit of those factors. At the end of World War II, the Cold War began. Soviet Union became a Union. There were things on up and they begin to flex their muscle in terms of Berlin and blowing up Berlin, and access to Berlin, the Berlin Airlift and all that. The Marshall Plan is trying to be implemented. Now, did I know all of these details when I was a nineteen year old private joining the army. No. I knew about the Berlin Airlift. But I did know that there had been some type of thing going on in Greece, and that's a little known fact is the war that was continuing to be fought in Greece in the '48-49 period. There was a quite a war going on there and U.S. forces were involved in that, and what that to me was is an expression of containment. The whole game for the next some many years, into the '90s, became a war of containment. The Soviets would do something, the U.S. would respond. The whole idea was to contain Communism. So they put up a wall around Berlin, we put up a wall around Communism. That was our intent, I think, and I understood that. Coming from Mississippi – Hattiesburg,

Mississippi, public education – I understood a lot of this. I didn't understand at all (and nor did I understand at all today, and probably wrong on some points) but it seemed to me and my simple way of seeing the world: the mission wasn't Vietnam. The mission was Anti-Communism. Vietnam was just another place to confront Communism.

So there's the context in which I went into the Army. I wanted to go Vietnam. I didn't join the Army not to go to Vietnam; I wanted to go. And thanks to my army, they were quick to get me there. So that's kind of the background, and so as we begin the context of discussion please know that I not only today value more than I did then, but to some extent then I understood the importance of what our military was charged to do. And I grew up in a military across the '70s, '80s, and into the '90s that was still focused on Cold War activities. We were in Germany as an army of occupation for awhile in the '50s, but we stayed in Germany in the '60s, '70s, and '80s. I served in Germany in the '60s and '70s, and my missions I will discuss in a little more detail later on. But Vietnam was going on in the '60s, but we were in Germany. See, Vietnam wasn't the only thing. It's not like you focus on a piece of work and that's all you do. You still have worldwide obligations.

Boyd: There's a broader picture.

Shepherd: There's always a broader picture. It's very important, it seems, to step back and recognize what's going on elsewhere and not to get what I call target-fixation. You get target-fixation, you fly into the target – you follow your bullets into the target. You've got to maintain situational awareness. What is this I am describing? It is nothing more than situational awareness. It seems to me that at all times – some of us, not all are adapt at it – some of us believe, at least, in terms like that, and I certainly do. So when I wasn't in Vietnam, I was gaining perspective on everything else that was going on in the world.

Boyd: So you met with your recruitment in '65 and he was quick to sign you up?

Shepherd: He was pretty impressed. I took him out, he was doing some type of map course at Camp Shelby, Mississippi, and he wanted to know some of the land out there, so I agreed to go with him in his car 'cause I hunted that area all my life and show him. He was going to do a map or something like that for all the soldiers that were assigned to the recruiting mission. And on the way back in a big old red squirrel ran across the street – highway – and I said, "stop the car, stop the car, sergeant." And he did, and I ran out, had my pistol. I ran back and the sergeant came back along and I found that squirrel at the top of a big old pine tree. And one shot, and I popped it. That squirrel fell down, and he was pretty impressed. So he knew I was ready for this type of life. [Chuckles] A little cute story about me and the recruiting sergeant and how I got started.

Boyd: When did you actually get over to Vietnam? You had to go through some basic training and everything like that. What was that like?

Shepherd: Just pretty much standard. Back then what it was, I went eight weeks to Fort Polk,

Louisiana, to train, just basic training. They teach you how to march and how to drill, and how to throw a hand grenade. You get to throw one. You get to throw a lot of play ones, you know, but you throw one for real.

Boyd: One actual? So you actually took out the pin, waited –

Shepherd: Well, you don't wait.

Boyd: Oh, you don't wait.

Shepherd: You take the pin out and you throw it and hope that they don't pick it up and throw it back. You've heard about all. Well, it doesn't happen very often like that.

Boyd: I've heard sometimes that they wait.

Shepherd: It's not a good practice. Oh, you can. It's about a five second fuse, but the thing is best to pull the pin and throw it. As soon as that handle comes off, five seconds starts. And five seconds – all of the sudden you got to scratch your nose and that can be a very fatal scratch [Laughter]. So it's probably best just to pull the pin and throw them. I've thrown a lot of them since then.

So basic training is focused on march and stressing the individual, because we all come from said different backgrounds and stuff and they are trying to bring you into a discipline system. They were trying to, first of all, bring you into discipline. To help you learn hygiene, how to care for yourself, both in the garrison and out in the field, how to throw a tent, how to sleep in the woods, shoot on a range, crawl under a barbed-wired area with machine gun bullets being fired over your head, and firing little bomb simulators off in little pits beside you as you crawl though. So trying to create the stress of a conflict and get you to be able to negotiate. So you become more of age as a soldier through basic training. You have sergeants that lead you through and they're mean for the most part. They don't have sweet sergeants leading you through basic training. Eight weeks, and then you get about a two week leave to go back home and see the girlfriends and the boyfriends and the neighborhood, and walk around with your one little ribbon or something that they gave you.

Boyd: Go back mom and dad all proud.

Shepherd: Yeah, because after eight weeks, you know, you've been away from home and you've never been away from home by yourself before (maybe), and so that was the idea. They gave us two weeks leave, and then on the Fort Gordon, Georgia, and that was back then an infantry training center. So I went to basic infantry training, Advanced Individual Training, AIT, as an infantryman at Fort Gordon, and that was another eight weeks. So you see the investment we put into soldiers. Today it may be shorter, but the investment's still there. We want to bring soldiers through a rationale of discipline, responsibility, and begin to hone them on what being a soldier is all about. So that's the basic in AIT. Some people went to AIT for technical things, like

signal, they'd go to some other school. Like medical, they's go to some other school. Whatever, I wanted to be infantry. I didn't want to be all that other stuff, although my aptitudes were good for it. And so I was given my dream, and I lived my dream. I went to Infantry Advanced Individual Training. We graduated from there and then I, of course, had qualified for Airborne training. So I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, for three weeks of jump school. Still a little ol' private, I was a Private E-2 'cause I had done well on the courses and stuff. I thought it'd make my 80 dollars a month – 87 dollars a month – you know, that was enough. And they gave me room and board and everything. The uniforms were all issued and everything.

Boyd: So you had a good experience?

Shepherd: Yeah, it worked out. I couldn't really go out and have a great time, but I could go out and have a good time. And did. Then, jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia, that's three weeks and that's very focused. It's very focused on learning how to do certain procedures, like parachute landing falls and strengthening the body to a little stronger than your average person because of the stress and stuff you take in parachuting process and so forth. You have to carry all your combat equipment and jump out of an airplane, and then you're gonna hit the ground, you know, with all that equipment. And so you do need to be in pretty good shape, 'cause you know the history of the Airborne is one pride, even dating back to Normandy and even before, Corregidor. Even in Korea there was a major Airborne operation, didn't go well. But nevertheless, being an Airborne was special. Plus, it gave you, and I'm a mercenary rascal, it gave you fifty five dollars a month more pay than the average soldier. Jump pay. Hazardous duty, if you will.

Boyd: Oh, hazardous duty pay, I've heard of this.

Shepherd: Jumping out of airplanes, okay, it's hazardous, so they give you fifty-five. They call it incentive pay. It's not hazardous duty, it's incentive. And I had the incentive to want to have fifty-five more dollars. It was almost double of my paycheck, as a private. So I did, I graduated from jump school, I want to say it was in May or June. Late May, early June, of 1965. Was being assigned to the 82nd Airborne at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. And we got on the buses the day we were finished graduation and everything was packed and got on the buses and the buses sat still. Now you can imagine big Greyhound buses, Trailway buses, those type. Trailway was a big company back then. I sat on the bus waiting with my orders in hand, in my little uniform, my parachute wings on my chest, ready to go to Fort Benning, Georgia – I mean, Fort Bragg, North Carolina – and join the ranks of the 82nd Airborne Division, and the buses sat and we didn't go. This is like July of 1965. No, it's even earlier than that. It's June of 1965. A sergeant stepped on the bus and told us all to dismount, without explanation. So we did, and we formed in our formation there in the parking lot. And what happened was that the army's priorities had changed and that we were being reassigned from our current orders to a unit called the 11th Air Assault Division at Fort Benning, Georgia. Now the jump school's at Fort Benning. We're at Fort Benning, and we're being reassigned to the 11th Air Assault Division. Little did we know what the 11th Air Assault Division was. But it was the experimental division that

developed helicopter operations, air assault operations, back in the '62, '63, '64, '65. The 11th Air Assault Division experimental was a division that was piece-mealed together and they were given a lot of helicopter and stuff and they began practicing the dynamics of combat using helicopters as look plat forms, as attack helicopter platforms, and so forth. So we were reassigned under that circumstance I just described to the 11th Air Assault in June of '65. I was assigned, specifically, to the headquarters company 1st Battalion Airborne, 1 A 7th Infantry, in the 11th Air Assault Division. Now, really I don't think the units are all that important, except to say that it later became the 1st Cavalry Division. That's the important thing. So there were a bunch of us fellows to fill out a unit called the 11th Air Assault Division and then the 11th Air Assault Division formed at Fort Benning, Georgia, reorganized as the 1st Cavalry Division Air Mobile. You write that, First Cavalry Division (Air Mobile). Okay, you'll see it the way I've written in there.

Boyd: Yes, luckily, you have given me a great biography. [chuckles] And very helpful for names.

Shepherd: Oh, good. The 1st Cavalry, one of the most interesting stories to see about Vietnam and I think – I don't much love TV or movies, even to this day, but the one I did go see was Mel Gibson in *We Were Soldiers*. Hal Moore, General Hal Moore, was a battalion commander, lieutenant colonel back in that period of time and he commanded over in the I want to say it was the 3rd Brigade. That is, if you watch that movie, they're standing on a parade hill and they became the 1st Cavalry. The colors are established and everything at Fort Benning, Georgia, and I was in that formation – not in the movie, but in the real life.

Boyd: In the real one, yes.

Shepherd: I was one of the little privates standing out there when we brought the 1st Cavalry into activation. Now a real big story about that: the 2nd Infantry Division had been at Fort Benning, and the 11th Air Assault was at Fort Benning. These two division were blended together into one. The 1st Cavalry Division colors were in Japan or Korea, I can't recall which, but they were flown, the colors were flown to Fort Benning, Georgia. The 2nd Infantry Division's colors were flown to Korea. The back field is Korea. So the 1st Cav in 1965 was in Korea, and in July their colors were brought and their name was brought back to the United States. There's a whole history behind the 1st Cavalry and why it was over there and stories about that. I won't go into that. But the 2nd Infantry was displaced then as the back field, and so the 2nd Infantry Division went to Korea. The colors went to Korea. Same people just stayed in place, but the colors transferred. Today, the 2nd Infantry Division remains in Korea. Those colors are still on the line in Korea, helping the South Koreans defend their freedom there. But the 1st Cavalry came back, became activated in July – I think it was July 3rd – of 1965 ad the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Assault) or (Air Mobile) – Air Mobile. Shortly after that, I remember as a private I was in headquarters company, and it was weird because I was an infantryman. Back then the specialty codes was we called it triple stick, 111. My job code was 111, infantry, but I was in a headquarters company which had no authorization for 111 so they abused me and neglected me

and so forth. I kept requesting an assignment down to a line company, a line company, A B or C company. But in any case, I was used for all miscellaneous details around the headquarters company at that time, which is kind of common. They don't mind misusing young soldiers.

Boyd: Especially in the beginning.

Shepherd: Oh, yeah, you take rocks and paint them white and put them out in front of the headquarters and stuff to make it look pretty, you know, and doing silly things.

Boyd: And next thing you know they want it red.

Shepherd: Oh yeah, that's the nature of being. But do you know what? As silly as that sounds, a certain amount of that was discipline. And, too, it's just about pride in your unit area and stuff. So I had a little bit of discipline from that, and a respect of authority.

Boyd: Kind of an initiation?

Shepherd: It's kind of initiation into being in a unit, you know. But I never was quite settled in headquarters company. I got into a lot of fights. The guys and I just saw life different, you know, and I was a pretty good fighter.

Boyd: Well, you're from Mississippi.

Shepherd: Well, yeah, I used to box. Golden gloves. I didn't box in a tournament. I was the sparing partner for a guy who was a national champion. He just whooped my butt all the time, didn't seem to mind, but he was a good friend, Jeff Townsend. He used to punch me out quite frequently at the YMCA when he needed somebody, when I recovered from having been punched out previously. I wasn't afraid of fighting, so I did get in to quite a bit trouble. In fact, there's more to that story later on.

But how I got out of headquarters company: I earned my way out (by fighting). Nevertheless, I walked by the head orderly room one day and the 1st sergeant he had the black and white TV on – 1965 – in the orderly room and everybody was crowding around. I said, “what's going on?” “Well, the President's making an announcement.” President Johnson, Lyndon Johnson. So I edged my up enough that I could see the screen and hear, and I remember exactly what he said. I say exactly, but almost to the exact statement. He said, “I have today” – he's talking about Vietnam – he said, “I have, today, ordered the 1st Air Mobile Division to Vietnam.” I think that was almost his words if you look back at the tapes and everything. Everyone there knew who that was. It was us. He didn't say 1st Cavalry Division, he said the 1st Air Mobile Division. And so I did, I saw that on TV. So a little later on, word came out we were going to Vietnam, and everybody was given one week leave to go home, say farewell, and get back to Fort Benning, which I did and got back. On the 20th of August of 1965, we boarded Greyhound buses again, and they took us over the Savannah, Georgia.

Boyd: This time they actually went.

Shepherd: Oh yeah. Oh yeah, These, unfortunately, rolled out the gate. Oh, by the way, before I get into that: on the parade field, on the 1st Cavalry Division, on July parade field, we became renumbered. We were no longer 1st of the 183rd Infantry. We became renumbered as 1st of the 12th Cavalry, 1st Battalion Airborne 12th Cavalry. We were formed as one of three battalions in the first brigade of the 1st Cavalry Division. Are you familiar with those terms? Battalions? Brigades? Division?

Boyd: To be honest, I have a laymen's idea of them.

Shepherd: It's just a construct, just like building blocks. You have platoon. You have a squad at the lowest end. You have a platoon. You have a company. You have a battalion. You have a brigade and you have a division. Okay, that's the building blocks of a combat division: squad, platoon, company, battalion, brigade and then division. Now, normally, there are generally three or four of each of these in the next structure. So, like a squad, there's four squads in a platoon. There are four platoons in a company. There are generally four companies in a battalion, can be more or less. There are generally three or four battalions in a brigade, and there are generally three or four combat brigades – three normally – in a division. Then, there are support brigades, people who are like helicopter brigades or artillery brigades and stuff like that. But I'm talking about infantry division, and it was structured like that, these building blocks. And just above squad, let's put in this: team. Very important. Team, there are two teams. There's and A team and a B team in each squad.

Boyd: Okay, two teams per squad.

Shepherd: That's your construct. When you learn that, you'll be able to understand when people are jumping back and forth between the language of U.S. Army, and there are more terms but let's don't get expert on terms here today. If you have questions, you are certainly welcome to call.

We became headquarters company 1st Battalion Airborne, 12th Cavalry, and we were a member of the 1st Airborne Brigade. At that time, the 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile), Brigade #1, was Airborne Infantry, all three battalions. Brigade #2 was leg infantry, and brigade #3 was leg infantry, not airborne qualified, but we all had to learn how air assault worked by training in Fort Benning prior to going over in the short time we had, and then of course doing it for real once we got overseas. So that's how we learn air assault, air technology, air assault maneuvers and tactics and stuff.

Boyd: More field training?

Shepherd: Yeah, but with real bullets flying, so if you screwed up you take the price, you know. There wasn't a lot of room for error, but we learn and there was a cost to learning. So in any case, 1st Battalion Airborne, 12th Cavalry, 1st Airborne Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division (Air

Mobile), we loaded on the buses August 20th, went to Savannah, Georgia. I loaded on a boat with my whole Airborne Brigade, three thousand men. Remember, I say back then men and women, you didn't have women serving in combat units, so I grew up, pretty much, in a male dominated society. We got on the U.S.S. *Geiger*, and I want to say there was three thousand paratroopers of the 1st Airborne Brigade on that one boat. They call them ships in the Navy, but to me it's a boat. I had a place in the forward cargo hole of that ship for thirty days. We went out of Savannah, Georgia, on August the 20th, around Cuba, down to the Panama Canal, went through the Panama Canal at evening hours – it was fun – and ended up the next morning on the Pacific side. Then, we floated across the Pacific to Hawaii and stopped at Pearl Harbor, right across from the *Arizona* Memorial and docked. They gave us a day off in Hawaii, got to get off ship. We had been at sea for two weeks. These are legs, here, we are not sailors, okay. And Hawaii, I don't think I ever heard from the time we got off the boat to the time we got back on it that evening – those that were getting back on it – I didn't hear a quite time. Sirens all day long. Yeah, the guys really had a good time. So we got back on the boat. They were still court-martialing and giving Article 15's to people, some of the men, as we continued floating out into the Pacific.

Boyd: Article 15, what's that?

Shepherd: It's a disciplinary punishment, non-judicial.

Boyd: Oh, kind of just –

Shepherd: You know, you've been a bad boy, you know, I'm going to take half your pay for three months and don't ever do it again, you know, that type thing. So we were being punished. I didn't get punished, but some of the other guys did, because they let us off the ship. We were supposed to go straight into Vietnam – Quinion, Vietnam, which is in central area, south Vietnam. But as it happened, there was a typhoon ahead of the ship, and so we pulled into Guam, and so having learned lessons from Hawaii, they weren't about to let us off the boat in Guam. Well, I was excepted because I had a step-father – I was actually adopted – but my step-father was an Air-Sea Rescue at Guam, and so I was allowed to get off and visit with him for about four hours, and he introduced his family to me and everything. His name was Webber Evans, and he is my biological father, and so it was nice to see him and meet him 'cause I knew of him and I had seen him when I was a little child, but no recent recollections at that time. But here I am now, pretty strong, good-looking, young eighteen year old Airborne Infantry private. It was nice to visit. I have a photograph that I treasure of he and I standing together, and we look so much alike.

So we stopped in Guam, and that happened. Then, we got back on the boat. And dad said – my father at that time, distinguish him from the soldier father, who is my step-father, or adopted father who had the name of Shepherd, and that's where I get my name, Kermit Shepherd – well, any case, to make a long story short, he said, "What do you want? Do you need anything?" I said, "No, sir, I don't. I pretty much got what I need." And he said, "Do you miss anything?" I said, "Well, I'd like to have a candy bar." And he said, "What kind do you want?" I

said, “Snickers,” and he bought me a whole case of Snickers candy bars, twenty-four individually wrapped, regular sized. I took a whole carton of Snickers candy bars to Vietnam with me. That became survival rations, actually. They were still good, even once they turned white with age and mold and whatever grew on them, you know. I still ate ‘em, and they were good.

Boyd: Well, I think Snickers bars can go through a lot. I eat Snickers bars all the time.

Shepherd: They are the smartest choice. When you are giving a choice for candy bars, go with Snickers.

Boyd: Well, they’re the most healthy.

Shepherd: And here’s why: they got peanuts. You got your protein, right. But the thing is they’ve got caramel, and the caramel it becomes a more long lasting taste and when you’re in deprivation, a situation of deprivation, sucking that little bit of candy and managing that piece of candy that you have in your pocket becomes a very significant event, you know. That’s a little story alongside, but we arrived in Vietnam off the coast on the ship, off the coast of Quinion, in the harbor of Quinion, on September the 20th of 1965. (I remember dates, I don’t know why.) It was night, and they were dropping the anchor and the artillery was banging up on the mountains, and then it would be quite for periods and all of the sudden it would be “boom, boom, boom” and then we’d watch a while and all the sudden artillery would be banging in the mountains and stuff. All visible from the ship, and audible from the ship. So the next day – Now, on the ship, you don’t just sit on a ship and not do things. I mean, everyday, we got up. This is really interesting ship life, you’ve got to know. Going to Vietnam on a ship, thirty days at sea, with two stops. We would get up in the morning. My company, in the battalion and in the brigade and so forth, my company’s job was to get up, we’d make our racks, and they folded up against the wall – canvas racks, folded up against the walls – then we would go up on deck. The very first thing, go on up, it’s like 5 o’clock in the morning, we’d go up on deck and we’d do about 40 minutes of PT – physical training. Then, we would come back down, be released, to come back down. You had fifteen minutes to get cleaned up – to get shaved, hygiene and everything – then we would get in line in the corridor. This was in the morning, started every morning for thirty days. We’d get in line for breakfast. We’d get in line. I was in the forward cargo hold of the ship. We’d get in line in the corridor that stretched all the way to the very back of the ship, big transport ship, and I’d wait in line. And wait in line, and wait line, and an hour would pass or so and I would get up and I would get my food. Then, we would only have just a few minutes to eat it and get out of there, because the next guys had to have a table to eat at and of course there wasn’t enough space. So you just slop it down and get out of there. Then, we would go back and we, at some point in time in the morning, we would have a class of some sort. Then we would kind of be released to our own reconnaissance, because we weren’t going anywhere. We were on a ship. And then we get in line around 10:30 or 11 o’clock for lunch, and we’d stand in line for an hour and go down the hall. We’d get our lunch, eat very quickly, and then they’d give us a break in the early afternoon from there. And normally in that break, they would either

give us shots or give us a class of some sort, or we would do weapons maintenance. We'd sit down with our sergeant and our fire team and we would go through and we would practice disassembling and reassembling and cleaning our weapons everyday. Everyday, clean your weapon.

Boyd: Now, did they time you when you did this, 'cause I've seen things where they time you?

Shepherd: Oh, that's more games and stuff. They didn't time. That becomes not just games, but in courses you have to be able to do it within a period of time, as a unit of measure. But most of that, I think, is just a bunch of hype.

Boyd: And what kind of courses were you taking?

Shepherd: Oh, M - 60 machine gun, how to do rapid fire. If it jammed, how to take corrective action, remedial actions, and how to put it back into service. How to draw out fields of fire. How to lay out the battle field in front of you in a defensive situation where you have left and right you would interface – interlocking fire. Interlocking fire, it means that you're shooting so that you are shooting diagonally in to somebody else's vertical engagement, so you have overlapping. Like if you extend both hands and wrap your fingers over one another, fully extended. The interlocking fire, that presents a good defense, because if the guy over here doesn't see the person he may pick him up – the enemy – because he is assaulting. If this guy gets him and you didn't see him, you know, that's good. If this guy gets killed, or blown up, or disabled somehow, you've still got the potential to close this gap. The gap doesn't open. So we practiced knowing how to lay out fields of fire and interlocking tables and stuff, and defensive things. We talked about navigation. We had practiced a lot of navigation through map courses back at Fort Benning and out in the woods and swamps at Fort Benning, and did map and compass operations and stuff, and endurance, stamina. Oh, boy stamina, you've just got to have a lot of stamina for this. But nevertheless, that's the type of things on the boat.

Boyd: What kinds of shots?

Shepherd: If there's a shot, we probably had it because the disease was a concern.

Boyd: Well, I know there was a lot, especially even in World War II, so I'm sure that you had a lot.

Shepherd: Yeah, Vietnam was either that bad or worse, perhaps.

Boyd: With all the stagnant water, you have to worry about malaria.

Shepherd: Swamps. Leeches. Malaria. I want to tell, you that to my recollection the numbers for my company, there's 165 enlisted in an Airborne Infantry Company. Of 165, I think there were 7 of us that completed the tour. Now, some of those boys were killed, many of

those boys were wounded, but the majority of those boys got a disease of some sort and were sent home or evacuated out of the theater. Two include some of our lieutenants. Now, we had 165 enlisted men, of which I can count for 7 of us who came back at the end of the tour, made the tour. Several of those had been wounded and turned back home to the unit – minor wounds. The lieutenants, there's four platoon lieutenants and then there a lieutenant who's the executive officer of the company, so there is five lieutenants in an infantry company. And then there's one captain, who is the company commander. So we you say an Airborne Infantry company, it's pretty — Back in those days the Airborne Infantry Company was composed of about 165 enlisted, five lieutenants, and 1 captain.

Boyd: And one of those lieutenants is more of an administrative lieutenant?

Shepherd: He's the ex-o – Executive Officer – and should anything happen to the company commander, he immediately assumes commander. Our company commander did get killed, one of our company commander's did. One of the company commanders got what we call black water fever. That's malaria so bad that your urine turns black. That's a severe form of malaria, and his name was Robert E. Lynnquest, Captain Robert E. Lynnquest, a West Point graduate. He was evacuated, I want to say, around December of '65, 'cause he had what we call black water fever. That was the word amongst the troops. That's the extreme form of malaria.

Boyd: So a majority of them got illnesses or disease, rather than what I would have thought, which would have been that they got wounded or got killed?

Shepherd: Well, we had a lot of wounded and quite a few killed, but my recollection would be that more people were afflicted with illness as a consequence. And I could tell you, but there's not enough tape to tell that whole story, just to focus on that side of it.

We basically got to Quinion and the next day we got off the boat. We went down troop ladders which were these little narrow ladders that zee along side of the boat, carrying duffle bags on one shoulder – the only possession we had in the world – had our combat equipment on, our helmets, our rifle at sling arm, and we're getting off this boat (thank God). I learned a valuable lesson that day and it is: whenever you're going off these little narrow troop ladders down the side, like 40 feet down the side of the boat, don't carry you duffle bag on the outside edge. Because every time the boat rolled, that duffle bag's heavy and all your fellow soldiers in the little boat down there that's fixing to take you to shore —

[End of Side A]

Shepherd: The little ditties that stick in my mind are things like it's pretty important to decide which shoulder you're going to carry your duffle bag on. I learned don't carry it on the outside shoulder, because then you're constantly struggling to hold it on and keep it from falling down on the guys that are already down there. It weighed about 60-70 pounds. That'd kill them.

Boyd: And didn't have your Snickers in there?

Shepherd: Oh yeah! Incentive definitely no to drop it. You're right. I didn't think about that at the time, nor have I, but you are absolutely right. There's a second good reason not to drop that duffle bag. But the landing ship craft took us. It's like in World War II, the bow that comes down and you run out of the front of the boat. We didn't know. We'd seen booming and banging and stuff. We hit this beach. The ramp came down and walked off, and here's all these Vietnamese civilians: "Hey G.I." Waving and it's like 60 minutes here, you know, at the movies or something, more of an administrative move. Then, we got on helicopters that were prepared from our division. They had been sent over, Chinooks, these big twin engine rotored helicopters. And they lifted us into a place called An Khe in the central highlands, so we immediately left Quinon. We didn't hardly stop at all. We were on the helicopters, and the division fell into this jungle. Just imagine: Jungle. There was a little area that had been etched out in the jungle where helicopters could land. It was hardly anything to brag about, and by the years end, in fact, shortly even within a year, that had just been raised. The whole jungle had been cleared out and it was like a city, with roads and things.

Boyd: Well, I heard that was a tactic, too, to get rid of jungle wood space.

Shepherd: Yeah, it was, later on. But we had to literally cut our way into the jungles and ferret out our spot, which was An Khe, A-N K-H-E, in the central highlands. And of course, in the course of that, the Viet Cong didn't appreciate us being there, so we had to constantly watch for them. We had a cook, in fact, who went out at night to take a crap – sorry for the language – and he killed two Viet Cong on the way back in. They tried to kill him, and of course he had his helmet on and his underwear. He had gone down to do business and on the way back two Viet Cong jumped in and he killed them both with a 45 pistol, you know. So it was a little bit treacherous in the base camp, you know.

We hired Vietnamese to help clear the perimeters and stuff, and begin to cut out the real low growth and stuff, and they would actually take stakes (some of them were Viet Cong sympathizers) and they would lay stakes that would align to our various fighting positions on the other side of the cleared area that they were working on. And at night they'd come back and try lob grenades or shoot or whatever. They could also find the gaps between the firing positions. You can imagine this: they were out there in the day, legitimate workers, civilian workers, kind of out there cropping along and they're kind of looking to this position to the left and this position to the right, and from their angle they can see maybe a little fold in the earth where they can crawl in at night and try to go in and sabotage something, or kill some Americans or something like that. So we had to be mindful of those types of things.

Boyd: How did you recognize the sympathizers? Did you just look for these little clues?

Shepherd: Well, you look for indications, and a lot of times we didn't recognize who was doing it but we knew it was on the working crew. There was so many of them and what we tried to do was take a careful — We learned. We didn't know at first. We learned over weeks or months of experience with these people that they weren't to be trusted, in that sense. We didn't know who to trust and who not to trust. Consequently, we had to distrust them all. We always

were watching for signs, walking after the left through the area to see if there were any obvious signs of where things were marked.

Boyd: Like the stakes?

Shepherd: Yeah, so we became kind of aware. Of course, I don't know to what degree or another the Division's intelligence was on top of this. It came through the brigade, the battalion, to the company and so forth. As a private, I recall going out on missions to walk the areas that had been cleared and looking for these little indicators. I don't recall ever finding one myself, but we did those type of things. We were very mindful of them. When they were out there working, in their Coolie hats and stuff, you know the straw hat, we watched them pretty carefully, you know, 'cause we didn't know what to expect. And foraging out the places became – An Khe became – a big city in the central highlands. It was actually kind of comfortable after awhile. They even got PX's in. But in those first months, and I want to say probably six weeks, we probably didn't have much. We had a tent. Everybody had different kinds of tents. Airborne Infantry is disciplined. Tents will be aligned. The stakes of this tent will be aligned with the stakes of that tent and the tent beyond. And you can look down it and if you look at one stake, you should only see the first stake. All the others are perfectly aligned.

Boyd: So it only looks like one tent?

Shepherd: Indeed. Airborne Infantry: paranoid about looking right. [chuckling] We basically put together a pretty darn good location. I slept in a little six-man tent, a little circular tent, in the headquarters. I was still in the headquarters company, and I had been continually trying to get down to one of the line companies. The First Sergeant wouldn't let me go. I was kind of a gopher. "Go do this, go for this, and go for that." And one day, the only way that we could clean ourselves was in the afternoons in Fall of '65 the monsoons came in. You could almost set your watch. You've heard about that, you can set your watch on monsoons. So we would be out working, cutting positions and building fire lines and such, and then we would stop, go back to our tents there, kind of strip down, get out and get ready for the monsoons. And when it'd come, we'd start soaping down real quick because it would be over. You didn't want to slow, 'cause you'd be left with soap for twenty-four or so, you know, all soaped up. [chuckles] I don't recall how we did our laundry, I seem to think we washed it first, then took your clothes off and then washed yourself and that's about as good as it got, then went back in your tent and got some clean clothes – dryer clothes, from the previous day, perhaps – and put those on. So it was a little austere, to say the least.

On one day, a boy named Yerudia – I don't know what his first name is, I'd probably remember it – he was an E-4 (I was an E-3 at this time, I had been promoted). All us privates were promoted to E-3 upon arriving in Vietnam, automatically. Yerudia, Specialist Yeridia, was a company clerk in the headquarters company, and his daddy was a colonel over in the Artillery, so he lived a charmed life and the First Sergeant thought the sun rose and set on him. I came in one day; and because the way the monsoons were, in the morning you always took your clothes and put them back in your duffle bag and you put them up on your little bunk thing that they had

provided for us, which were little cots. Everyone in the tent organized and cleaned and stuff, and then you went out because the water would run under your tent. If you left things on the floor, they would get soaking wet. There was no floor; there was dirt. But to make a long story short, life was interesting. One day I came in and Yerudia had dumped a boy's – I don't know who the boy was, but no boy in our tent – had dumped all his clothes out and the mud that had run under the tent and everything. I said, "Stop, don't do that." He was taking them out and throwing his clothes. I said, "Why are you doing that?" He said, "Because." His duffle bag was laying over on Yerudia's bunk, and he took offense to that. I told him to stop. He didn't. I beat him up. I beat like in an old western. It was funny. This is a funny story. I never told this to many people, but I beat him so badly that he went out the flaps of the tent, in my mind, like an old western going out the swinging doors of the bar, you know. I beat the snot out of him. I got angry. I lived to regret that, because First Sergeant didn't take kindly to it. He called me up. Immediately, Yerudia went crying to the First Sergeant, of course, and I got called up. First Sergeant said, "Shepherd, I want to court martial you under Article 15." He threatened me with all this stuff. And he said, "What do you have to say for yourself?" I said, "First Sergeant, I do not belong in your company." He said, "I agree," and within minutes I was transferred to Charlie Company, 1st Airborne Battalion, 12th Cavalry. I finally made it to the infantry, but it took a fist-fight to get there.

Boyd: Finally got to where you wanted to be?

Shepherd: I got to where I wanted to be. I'd probably do the same thing today if I saw somebody doing that. He deserved a butt-kicking and he got it! In any case, the early days of Vietnam were tough because of the deprivation. I mean living in deprivation. It wasn't that we didn't have food. We had canned foods and rations that were sent to us, but we had to prepare them ourselves and here we are in more of a garrison. Everyday, more of a garrison appearance to it as its evolving into a garrison type environment with tent cities and all this around. Miles of it.

Boyd: More clearing of the jungle?

Shepherd: More clearing of the jungle. More barbed wire going up between us and the jungle. Interesting thing, a road raider was off clearing a road over in our area unearthed a King Cobra snake, and we had these – now remember, we're an Air Assault Division, everything's very small. Our Road Raiders are smaller than what you see on the street surrounding the county. There about half the size, practically, of a standard Road Raider that you're familiar with. But it unearthed this den and this big cobra came out, and of course the boys on the sight killed and stretched it out. It was from the front tire to the back tire, the greater maybe 15 feet long. You and I have this image of these little things. People've seen piccolos and these little snakes coming out of the grass. And us guys looked at this snake and said "this is something to behold!" Some of the observations are thing you just never expect: a snake that big.

Boyd: Kind of made you realize you were in the jungle.

Shepherd: Oh yeah! Before I beat up Yerudia there, that ol' ditty there, had that fight, we were out taking our shower in the monsoon. You know, all of us guys butt naked trying to get the soap off before it stopped raining, and here comes the biggest tarantula spider you can imagine. It was so big we started running around talking to each other. We're all butt naked, "What are we going to do?" You know this big fuzzy spider in our tent area and we didn't know whether to shoot it or stab it. You know, how to kill it, it was so big. So one of the boys grabbed a bayonet, put it on his rifle and we stabbed that spider to death. To give you an idea, here's right out of Mississippi or may have been right off the streets of New York City and this is what we are having to accommodate. This is going on in Afghanistan. This is going on in Iraq today, where the fellows are seeing these different things that you and I didn't grow up imagining. There's more stories like that.

Boyd: It's such a different environment.

Shepherd: The thing is it's a hostile environment. It's hostile from the plant life to animal life. There was a snake over there – I think it's a Bamboo Pit Viper, but we called him Mr. Two Step – you get bit by him, you can take two steps and you die that's how fast the venom acts. It's a neuro-toxin, I think. So those types of snakes are just lurking in the brush, so if you put your hand up. You may be right along side a snake or something when you are going through jungle. You don't know, so the hostility of the battlefield, was not always the enemy but it was the environment itself.

Boyd: Did you all carry anti-venom with you?

Shepherd: No, you know what the secret to that one is? Don't take two steps. [Laughter] If you get bit, stand still. You take two steps, you'll die. That was a joke. So you learn to accommodate wildlife and stuff. There were nights I woke up and have snakes across my legs and we were in an ambush and I couldn't do anything, but that's another story for later. Wildlife was something else.

You talk about discipline. You have to go through all that roughness of Basic, AIT, Jump school, all the harassment of the First Sergeant in the unit, because when you are placed into the battlefield environment there is a diversity of challenges that one has to accommodate and to handle, so those are just a few of my experiences.

We saw combat quite a few times. It started pretty quick. Actually, I don't remember all the dates of this but I think it was October or September. October we went into a place if you look at Vietnam in that area, central area, you've got the coastal plains then you have a step up of about maybe 800-1000 feet, then you have your midlands. And then, yet, it steps up again a third time. It's tiered up, so can imagine as you go into Vietnam toward Cambodia it tiers up from coastal plain, central highlands, to mountainous highlands and so forth. An Khe was in the central highlands, so what they did was they sent us back on operations back into an area called Phuung Son which was back down toward Quinon, in a place called Happy Valley. We were told that, since the French, we were the first white people to ever going in to that area, and it was a bloody battle. The thing that hurt us the most was our own artillery. We had a lot of boys

wounded with shrapnel from artillery rounds blowing up in the trees. It was wooden shrapnel; it was splinters as it were. My company, interestingly, was charged with securing the battalion headquarters and the aid station, so I saw a lot of the boys being brought in from B Company and A Company that were hurt from up there. I sat on the side of a helicopter one night. I was on break of my guard post and eating some rations and talked to a boy who was on the helicopter. It was a rainy night, monsoons were there, and the helicopter couldn't fly him out to a higher level of care. He and I chatted for awhile. I don't remember the boy's name. I went back over to my position that night, and the next morning I went back over when I had a chance to just check on him 'cause the helicopter was still sitting there. And he wasn't. I found out he was in body bag next to it. He had died from blood loss, because helicopter and the pilots back then did not have instrument capabilities so when the weather to certain levels of badness they couldn't fly during the monsoons. He was wounded and unfortunately that's just the story of how life can go. You know, a young man died. He was in the care of our physicians, in all that we had available for him but his need exceeded our capability. He was on helicopter that could have rushed him back to life-saving support, but it just never got off the ground because of the conditions.

Boyd: Because of the technology?

Shepherd: It just wasn't there. Pretty much pilots back then were day-light only. For the most part, clear weather pilots. Good condition pilots. Helicopter were still coming with a knowledge how to use them and how to fly them effectively. The new variations (which are now antiques): The Huey, a fine helicopter; the Chinook. Both of those still fly to some degree or another. We had Light Observation Helicopter – LOH's – which were the old glass bubble H-13's which we learned to put machine guns on one of the skids. They put a sub-point 62 machine gun to make it a little light to scout but to give them something to shoot back with. If you got into a situation, you want a pilot there that has a little comfort thinking he's got something he can do. You know, pull the trigger and shoot some bullets, maybe he'll hit something, maybe not. I'm probably elaborating too much on the details, it's just being a soldier.

Boyd: No. It's great!

Shepherd: That's what being a soldier is like, at least in Vietnam. For the most part, you got to just maintain situational awareness. On through Bai San, we took our first hits into Ia Drang Valley up in the highlands. That's where *We Were Soldiers, Once... And Young* took place. Our company as I can recall, and I believe it to be true, we were the ones that came in initially. At that time, we operated in platoon size patrols. We were on patrol. Everyone was out. The idea of Air Assault, the technology, was when a patrol, a platoon size patrol, you could put lots on the maps. You see, you've got four platoons to a company, four companies to a battalion, so when you look at the multiples of that you've got a lot of platoons that can cover a lot of square-acreage. Miles. So when you've got all these little platoons out there, somebody is going to bump into the bad guy. The idea of Air Assault technology was when we bumped into them was to hold on to them. Keep them engaged, and then the rest the Division would always have a ready force to hop on helicopters and fall in around them. If we were outside of artillery, they

could even pick up artillery with helicopter and bring them closer so they could shoot artillery for us. That's Air Assault technology at its most simple understanding. What you want to do is find and fix the enemy, that was the job of the Infantry platoons, and once you got them engaged and defined – you are basically shooting it out with them one-on-one – all this other stuff sets in motion. You envelope them by helicopter technology. You envelope them and you kill them, or capture them. That's the idea of Air Assault technology. We were the lead organization on in developing those type capabilities, tactics and techniques. In Ia Drang, the 3rd Brigade (I want to say it was the 1st of the 7th Cavalry) they engaged the enemy and it was a brigade, roughly a brigade size enemy organization, and the whole story is told very well in *We Were Soldiers, Once...Young* by Hal Moore. There's a movie with Mel Gibson. That's an excellent movie. I can see myself (not that it was me) but I can see the way they displayed the soldier is very realistic to the time. The equipment is the same, and it's a pretty awesome movie.

Boyd: I think the director was actually a veteran so I think they drew upon that.

Shepherd: It may have been. To me, of all the movies I have seen – I've seen one or two, I haven't seen a lot – but that's the one that really comes close to home. I can relate to the experiences on that.

Boyd: You mentioned that when you went in to some of these places you were the first sighting of white men since the French. Did you have a diverse company?

Shepherd: Yes. In fact, that's a very good question. Let me back up and get to that point. It's the first time that I ever slept in a room with a black man. It's the first time I had ever done a lot things around black people. I'm from Mississippi. I'm a white boy. I grew up in a segregated, not an integrated school system. There was a lot of going through basic and AIT of learning of cross-cultural diversity and respect for each other, and to a degree disrespect for each other. Back in those times, the gulf was very broad.

Boyd: That's the time of Civil Right and everything. It was very controversial.

Shepherd: Very controversial. Heated controversy. In the United State, the federal government was moving to integrate schools and stuff. You know in your own state, Alabama, George Wallace and a whole lot of things going on, a lot of dynamics. When you take it all and back out again to gain what we agree on as perspective, look at the dynamics of our nation: what's going on politically, socially, militarily. What a melting pot of activity! All of that is significant to the time.

In any case, here's an example. The first time I ever drank after a black man. Corporeal Usher was my fire team leader (I was in 1st platoon). In cutting, one day, our way through the jungle we opened into a little open area. It's think jungle, very think, and kind of went into an open area and there was a little bright green bush growing in that open area that had little red things on it. I recognized instantly a pepper bush, and I grabbed a couple of those red peppers and put them in my pocket. We kept going and moved across the clearing and cut our way on

through and just kept going. Later on, the lieutenant said stop for breakfast, and we did. We set up our positions and stuff. You don't stop, you set up defensively anytime you stop.

Boyd: You have the watchers and then you have the people eating?

Shepherd: Yes, everybody has their area of responsibility. You're always ready, 'cause you are in their territory. I opened a can of turkey loaf, which was my favorite, little old tiny can. You learn with C-rations you always go for the tiny cans. The big cans are too bulky and heavy. We don't have fancy rough sacks. All we had were little butt pack that were about this big [motions sizes with hands]. So you didn't have all this fancy stuff that you're acquainted with.

Boyd: Yeah, that what I am familiar with from World War II era kind of times.

Shepherd: We just had little butt packs like this. So what I'd do is I'd put my C-rations in socks. I'd take a pair of socks and put my C-rations in a pair of socks and tie it up with web gear on the left and on the right. On the web gear, you had your hand grenade, your ammunition pouches. And that little butt pack back there was all ammunition, and maybe something to brush your teeth with and shave with, and maybe a facecloth. And maybe not a change of clothes, but a change of underwear. (Some people like to change of underwear, some people didn't.) I'd rather put ammunition back there than underwear. I can't kill nobody – although maybe I could – with underwear, but I certainly can reach back there and get more ammunition. So you learn to manage your load. Well, in any case, I began eating this turkey loaf and it occurred to me – I can see it in my mind's eye so clearly right now – that I had those red peppers in my pocket. I pulled them out. I cleaned off one and put it in my mouth and that is the biggest mistake I ever made in my life. When God makes something perfectly, that no man has ever been around, it's perfect. And the heat of that pepper was perfect. I almost had to be evacuated. It burned my mouth up! It became inflamed and everything. I drank my two canteens of muddy water. There ain't no water taps. A good soldier never misses an opportunity to fill a canteen, you don't know when you'll get another opportunity. Every stream we'd dig out a hole and let the mud settle, and then let the water trickle into our canteens, put three iodine tablets in them and put them away. By thirty minutes, most of the stuff in there was dead. You were going to drink it, but it was dead. I drank two canteens of muddy water, which was all my load, and I couldn't put the fire out. In fact, I was just at the point at being evacuated. I was hurt. I did it to myself. [Chuckles] And Corporeal Usher gave me his canteen, and do you know what I found out? A black man's water taste just as good as a white's man's water, and even better if you need it. Little life experiences in race relations as we come to understand culture as it comes together in the military. Other examples of that: in Ie Drang we picked up the dead bodies, some of them. I'm not sure all of them, but many of them. The first dead body I personally picked up and carried was in Ie Drang. It was a staff sergeant that had been shot through the head. I want say his name was Evans. He had had a soft cap on, just like I would crease my hair if I had it – you know, where a man would part his hair. The bullet had gone through the hat and just scraped his skull, but enough that his brain protruded out and it took him an hour or two to die according to some of the men who were with him.

Boyd: Enough to get swelling.

Shepherd: Yes, and the contusion and subsequently the damage to the brain, and he died. He had been dead for maybe twelve to sixteen hours, rigor mortis had already begun to set in. So Corporeal Usher said, “Shepherd, go on, you and these two guys, go over and pick up that man. Get his body over here.” To do that, we had to go maybe 125 meters, like a football field or more, from where his body was to where the helicopter were coming in to pick them up. We couldn’t see very much because of the jungle and the environment. I couldn’t the two guys to pick the Sergeant’s shoulders up. There were three of us, dead weight is very hard to carry as you know. I cussed them out. They wouldn’t touch him because he stank. He had been in the field for awhile. He was dead and he stank. He had rigor mortis.

Boyd: Well, he was decomposing.

Shepherd: To some degree, not that bad at that point. But it was just a combination of a lot of factors. I cussed them out. I said, “Y’all take his feet. I’ll take his head and shoulders and we’ll carry him over.” So we picked the Sergeant up and we carried him for about a football field’s length through the jungle, up and down bomb holes. Some of it was just gorgeous dry stream beds, and we had to wrestle him up and down, up and down. I didn’t notice at the time dragging him through that environment over to present him to the people who would bag him up and get him ready to go home that one of his hands (I think it was his left hand) was dragging on the ground. I couldn’t lift him high enough. When we got over there, we presented the Sergeant and they gave us a bag, and we placed him in the bag and zipped him up. But I noticed in touching his hand then, I looked at his skin. The black skin – he was a black man – (and I’m using as an example my skin) but his skin was no different than mine under that black. The dead skin on the epidermis had scraped off in dragging that hand and what I saw was a white man. I same color as my skin was his skin underneath that epidermis. That was a life message to me about value and respect for mankind. Those types of experiences, everybody has their own different psychological effects.

Boyd: But it made you put it in the broader perspective.

Shepherd: Well, and again, I always introduce myself ‘cause I don’t know why but for some reason I have always kind of been like that, strange. I’ve always tried to take things, situational awareness, try to be aware of things, and understand things. If I don’t understand them, I try to figure them out. I’m pretty good at that. It’s just a natural component to what makes me tick.

Boyd: Well, and your experienced that you had in Vietnam helped you understand race relations in a way that somebody who, say, still was in Mississippi, you wouldn’t have been to listen to that when you were 16/17.

Shepherd: And I can’t tell it here and make it sound any better than it does. It’s an ugly story, but it’s a life experience. A black sergeant and a black corporeal were kind of my

easements into understanding mankind.

But then of course, once we delivered the sergeant, we were exhausted. We were exhausted, we were whipped. We had just struggled to get his body there. It was so hard. I was exhausted and we hadn't had anything. We had been pushing all night and had to stop and then continue early the next morning to get to him, because we were on patrol and had been ordered over to him to help him. In any case, what did I do? I sat down and ate a pecan cake roll and had breakfast. Immediately after the type of a trauma, for most people a traumatic situation, I had to sit down and take care of myself.

Boyd: You had to deal with your own needs.

Shepherd: It wasn't psychological. It's just an observation I made. I had to eat and I had to get something to drink. And I was still burning, probably, from that tongue injury. So you look at all the glory of battle, and you mentioned a moment all the writers go to the glory of it. What is more prevalent in battle is not glory, it's death and destruction. It's dismay that this could be happening.

Boyd: But then living your natural life, you have to deal with it.

Shepherd: And sustaining yourself. You have to deal with the situation. You have to have the awareness to take care of yourself or else you'll succumb to illness or disease or something. You'll lose your energy level.

Boyd: Eat a hot pepper.

Shepherd: Eat a hot pepper. You don't want to do that, because when God makes something he makes it perfect. But to make a long story short, after some of these experiences it was determined that our company clerk got killed. So the First Sergeant made me company clerk 'cause I could type – not because I knew anything, but because I could type. So for a couple of months, I think late December, January, and February of '65 to '66, I counted as the company clerk. I got to know all the boys. We were at this point taking casualties, and disease was taking its toll. So we were getting a lot of new people in. I was one of the few people that knew everybody that came in 'cause I met them when they came in, where they were from, how to get the insurance settled and all that. I got to stay in garrison base camp for awhile and not go out on patrols and combat, but stay at garrison and help the First Sergeant run the company administratively.

Boyd: So your duties were more like paperwork at that time?

Shepherd: Paperwork and morning reports. Every morning you did a report. You could only make three typos. It was a regular old manual typewriter, but you could only have three errors in the whole report. You had to enter all these numbers in. How many captains do you have? How many lieutenants do you have? How many of those next set? How many are on

leave? How many are KIA? How many are WIA? What is your effective fighting force? I don't remember what the captions were and stuff, but it involved down to numerically how many people you had to put on line each day. And then you had to give a by name accounting of Bill Smith, killed in action, line 1. Then, Bill Johnson killed in action by hostile fire. You would do a morning report everyday, and for those three or four months that I was doing that I hated it. That's not what I joined the Army to do, but nevertheless, somebody had to do it. Then, finally, we got somebody in that was a clerk, by the name of West, by profession, and I was able to go back to infantry. Most people would want a job like, and I was the guy that didn't but nevertheless inherited it by the natural out of the natural circumstances and situation.

Boyd: Because you were able to see all these people coming, did you ever grow close to anybody in your platoon?

Shepherd: Yes, some of th guys you go through basic and jump school together. In fact, one of my friends got killed just before Christmas. His name was Flemming, he's a black buy believe it or not, talking about the race you know. Flemming was from – I can't recall the Islands – he was actually from New York City but he was derivative from either the Virgin Islands or one of the islands, Puerto Rico. He was a black ma, thin good-looking strong man. I remember he and talking when we got that leave back in Fort Benning before we were going to Vietnam. He went home to New York. He came back. He said, "Johnnie," one Sunday morning he and I saw each other just before. He said, "Johnnie, guess what?" I said, "What?" He said, "I got married. I married my sweetheart. While I was on leave, we got married." I said, "Flemming, I am so happy for you. She'll be there when you get back." He was very happy. Well, Flemming was killed by accident in December of '65. He was in another company, he wasn't in my company. He was in D Company. One morning – I remember it clearly – I had just gotten a package of chocolate fudge that my mother had made and sent over (and it was delicious). I had the first piece and begun to faint. There was a silent, single gun shot, and we rushed out of tent over to the next company, D company, which was just two or three tents over. They said Flemming's been shot. One of the boys had failed to completely unload his pistol, a 45 pistol, and shot Flemming in the head by accident. Flemming was laying there, squiggling on the ground. When you get a brain shot, your nerves tense and you jiggle for awhile.

Boyd: Your muscles contract.

Shepherd: Yes, contractions and so forth, and here's death at its ugliest. Scrambled eggs laid out on the side which were brains, by the way. We grabbed him and put him on a truck and rushed him to the hospital and he died. Yeah, so I was close to the guys, and there's what happened. I gave the candy away. I couldn't have.

Boyd: It just kind of ruins it.

Shepherd: But the other guys enjoyed it. That was one. I'm sure there were others. A boy named Paul Haddabon was a radio operator in our company and he got killed. Many of the guys

got killed, and of course when I was company clerk I knew which ones. In fact, I was pulled in to duty with what we call the summary report officer. When a guy gets killed, they assign a lieutenant to be the summary record officer, in other words, to make sure his affairs are checked and everything is in order before they transmit the remains and the effects of the man. You know, the personal property and stuff, you have to go through all that. You don't send everything back. They cull what comes back.

Boyd: They don't send everything back?

Shepherd: There's some things that naturally, probably, don't go back. *Playboy* magazine. If the guy had a *Playboy* magazine, you probably wouldn't send that back. The lieutenant would take that and discard that, you see, and destroy it. Things that if you had something of an embarrassing nature, or something, so it was more on the family would not take discomfort over anything that would be unsettling.

Boyd: You kept the family in mind?

Shepherd: Well, it was. That was the mission summary record officer to my recollection. One of the jobs I had, we had an artillery round land in the foxhole of three boys, and I knew all of them well. One of them was from New Orleans, Louisiana, and he was a new boy. He just got in, and nobody knew him but me, so I had to go identify the three remains. We actually pieced up the bodies and put them in ponchos and brought them back, and sent them back to helicopters in the morgue and they pieced them together. Then, I got called in from the field. I was in the field with them. I got called in because I was the only person who could identify this one boy. When I got there, John Boothe had died in that artillery blast. John Killelly had died. John's head was blown off behind his head. The shrapnel had taken him out from back there and his brains were gone. It looked like a Halloween mask, but his throat and everything were still there. He was laid on the table, and I identified John. Boothe was blown to pieces, but Boothe had two black panthers – if you've ever seen a black panther like this – he had those tattoos on both forearms, and enough meat was left on the forearm to identify John and I was able to confirm that was his remains. And the other boy, they could not find enough of him. Several days later another company moved through that area and found his bottom, but by that time what remains had been left were sent to Saigon. So the summary record officer ordered me to go with him to Saigon to identify this boy's – and I remember this boy's name, he wasn't there a week – I went to Saigon. When we got to Saigon to identify the remains because some other company had allegedly, the summary record took me with him to identify him. There wasn't anything to identify and then the mortician told us that the remains they had found were the belt and the pretty much the groin area, but his pants were still on and he had his wallet and it had his ID in it, and it had some money. We used script; we didn't use U.S. money. We used military currency called script. And he had some script that we had been paid it had shrapnel holes and blood all over the script. I remember the lieutenant folding it up and putting it into a little bag to bring back with us. So those types of experiences are in the life of a soldier. You do the day's business, and, yes, I knew people. I knew them all personally, just some I was closer with than others. I

thought the world of most of them. They were good boys. None of them were bad. I'm not sure they were all committed to be soldiers. They just they were, at least, had the spirit to want to be Airborne. You didn't just default into Airborne, you had to select to be in Airborne. You had to demonstrate. You had to have the strength and the ability. You had to have the "hooah," you know, to be an Airborne soldier. So all of them were Airborne and that would tell you of the character – the metal – that the man was made from. Each different in their own way, but at the same time each similar by virtue of wanting to be something just a little bit more special than just an average soldier, by virtue of the Airborne training and so on. So Vietnam came and went, we had a number of combat experiences, very close in-fighting. The company commander was shot through the head. I don't know, it just goes on and on.

Boyd: For time line, you were in infantry for how many months? Then you went to clerk for how many months? And then you back into infantry?

Shepherd: Well, let's see, the headquarters company didn't last long 'cause I beat up Yerudia pretty quick. That was like September. Some where in early October I was in the infantry by virtue of a fist fight. October, November, and much of December, I was on line as an infantryman. In late December, we had been pulled back into garrisons for Christmas, that's how I got the chocolate and Flemming came to get killed and all of that, but right around that time I guess I ended up being brought up into the orderly tent to type the morning report and, basically, do the mail and stuff like that for the troops. I stayed there January, and February – maybe a little into March, I want to say – I remember though that we had in February we had real bad situation. Our whole mortar platoon got overrun and almost all the boys were killed. I had to rush out to the field to try to get all the names as we picked up there bodies and sent them back to morgue. Then, the lieutenant out there told me to get my ass back on the helicopter and get out of the field. First of all, he asked when I got there, "what in the hell are you doing here?" I said, "I'm here to find out what's going on. I need to know the names. I got to put them in the morning report, sir." He said, "Okay, go over there with the radio operator." It was raining, and we put up overnight. I inventoried all the boys that had been killed and I took those names back in the next day so I could the morning report. S. L. A. Marshall. If you've never read him, he's a brilliant writer. He's a retired general. He was the U.S. Army Historian for World War II. S. L. A. Marshall came to Vietnam and I met him, and all the boys did. He wrote a book, *Battle of the Monsoons* and one of the chapters in there is about this little story I'm telling you about our mortar platoon being overrun. S. L. A. Marshall, like I say, he was a U.S. Army historian, so you'll find a lot about Marshall. He wrote a lot about Vietnam, and it's firsthand. He went out and he talked to the guys who experienced it first hand. He was seasoned because he was a soldier. He could take it and interpellate what was being said, and as a writer he was gifted and he could reflect that history. Excellent, excellent book. The little story I just told you about the mortar platoon getting overrun and all the things that happened there.

I guess I mentioned about snakes and animals. I was laying on ambush one night with a bunch of guys in my fire team squad platoon, and Baby Ray Reynolds' job was to watch and I just laid down. Baby Ray was notorious about falling asleep while he was on position, you know, and so we were all right on the same position, just laying open pretty much in thick vines

and stuff like that. These were called “wait-a-minute” vines; they’re stickers and they grabbed you and you have to wait a minute to get them off of you before you can take another step. We were at a “wait-a-minute” vine patch and set up an ambush on segment 4 of the Ho Chi Minh Trail, as much as I could tell. The number 4 was etched English number 4 on a tree, and we called it segment 4 of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We set up ambush and that night we were laying in ambush. It was so quiet you can’t snore. You are ever so quiet about everything you do. Enemy’s around. So it’s two hours on, two hours off. There were three of us, so I guess there was a little bit more than that: two hours on and four hours off, and then you’d be on again. Baby Ray was on and I knew he was notorious for falling asleep so I dozed off a little bit and I felt something heavy on my legs. And I said, “Oh, he’s done fallen asleep, of course.” I looked up and it’s pitch black. I couldn’t see. I’m looking for Baby Ray and I couldn’t see anything, but I could feel something laying heavy on my legs right below the knee caps. So there’s a way I have of handling a flash light, I guess infantrymen figure it out, but you don’t just turn on a flash light. It has a red filter in it and with a military flashlight I cover my fingers over the face of the flashlight and I turn it on, and then I crack my fingers to let just a little glimmer of light out. And I did and this big snake was laying there and it slithered off.

Boyd: Oh my gosh!

Shepherd: Oh, my goodness. I have no idea what type of snake it was, but only that it was a bid one. I laid there perfectly still as if dead to let that snake get away from me. But here we are in ambush, I couldn’t day anything. I couldn’t tell anybody, couldn’t do anything, had to stay quiet. That’s the composure that’s required of a soldier in those circumstances.

Boyd: I wouldn’t have been able to do that.

Shepherd: And Baby Ray was asleep, I was right. I thought, “You son-of-a-bitch!” [Laughter] But there are little stories like that. We had them sneak up on us some times. And then, one time, there was a fellow, the enemy – three of them, I think – that bumped into us, and when they sensed that we were there they hauled ass. I mean, they stumbled through the woods and fell over bushes and everything. They were making all kinds of noise, and one of them ended up in rocks just below my position. And to throw the grenade or not throw the grenade was the question. So I sent Baby Ray back over to the Staff Sergeant and the sergeant said “you throw that goddamn grenade, or I’m going to court martial your ass.” That was the word he brought back. I said, “But I got him done there, sergeant.” The sergeant said don’t do it, so I didn’t throw the grenade and, stone by stone, the guy about ten or fifteen minutes later he stumbled out of that position when he was certain that we weren’t up there. He got away with his life, but there were others that didn’t and we had quite a few interesting fire fight. Good thing: they lost. I hate to say you have to kill people, but that’s just the business at hand, you know. I did go through the wallet of one the fellows I shot and he had a picture of his girlfriend, a beautiful young lady such as yourself. Beautiful young North Vietnamese lady, and you could tell that they were in love, but I had to go through his possessions. It didn’t affect me then as much as it does today, just thinking about it from the human standpoint. I had to do that, but I killed her boyfriend, or

husband I'm not sure which. Some people are affected by the excellent marks. Some don't have time to get that close and personal with it, as I had the duty of having to go back through this person, search him down and turn in the papers that I found and turn in the stuff that he had on him. It was my duty, and in doing that duty I became very acutely aware that he was a human being, too. It was just that he didn't get me, I got him. I wish I could remember the staff sergeant's name – Edwards! Staff Sergeant Edwards. Staff Sergeant Edwards killed a man who was trying to kill me, shot him through the head. The guy had thrown a grenade on me and it went off, but apparently we were in rocks and it was kind of like slate. It peppered my face and I got a little stone in my ear and the side of my head, but nothing disabling. I was down reloading my rifle. I learned how to manage magazines, and any soldier that can't tell you how to manage magazines was never there. They have never been in a fire fight. The M - 16 rifle has a recessed cylinder, meaning that the bullet has to go into a chamber that's hidden down inside. It's not easy to single shot one. If you had to put a single bullet in at a time, but the magazine is what you need to have. Well, why I tell you that is this: you can only fill so many magazines and you generally carry about, I think, it was about 240 rounds of magazines, which is 20 rounds, too, so that would be however many twenty is into that. So 480 rounds was the basic load. Of course, I had about twice that 'cause my butt pack had nothing but ammunition in it. But they were in cardboard boxes. Well, in this one fire fight where these guys got killed, I was going up the hill. We were on line. It was the basic infantry assault. Everybody on line. You've got the guy to your right, the guy to your left, and you're shooting at the enemy and you are going up the mountain. You are assaulting up the hill. We were doing that and dropped to a knee behind a tree to reload, take a magazine out and put a new magazine in, and when I did a grenade went off and subsequently Sergeant Edwards saw the guy and shot him. I kept going. I never saw the guy. Going up, I got to the top of the hill and I moved past where he was and I didn't even see him, he was so camouflaged beautifully. I didn't see him. His body was laying there and I never saw him, and I got to the other side and Edwards' was screaming "Lay down a base of fire! Lay down! Don't let him get over the hill!" My job at that time, I was appointed to be the anti-sniper guy. My job was to watch tree tops for snipers. I had no idea until I saw this one tree moving, where I shot the one guy, and he was walking. It was a walking tree.

[End of Side B, Tape 1]

Shepherd: We're back on tape, tape number 2. I was saying we were on line assaulting and Sergeant Edwards killed the enemy soldier ahead of me and I didn't see him because he was so beautifully camouflaged. I moved over and took up a position on the back side of the hill to see if anybody was trying to run away and I didn't see any. Our machine gunner came up behind me, he was actually an ammunition barer. You have two guys designated to carry ammunition for a machine gun, and he was an ammunition carrier, a big ol' black guy. All of the sudden, [recreated machine gun fire] and bullets were whizzing all around me and ricochets going off, and I turned around to shoot and it was whatever this boy's name, he had seen the boy and it was twitching and he empty a magazine into that body. It was going through the body back up through the body off the rocks underneath and going all directions. Why it didn't kill me, I don't know. It was going everywhere. He unloaded. An M -16 will unload 20 rounds in 1.5 seconds.

That's that fast [snaps his fingers]. Twenty rounds of highly anti-personnel bullets. Very personal, but anti-personnel, bullets going every which a where. And he scared the snot out of me. I just about killed him 'cause I was on edge. Everybody was on edge. There were screams going out "medic, medic!" from left side over there. A boy from New York had a muscle shot on his arm, he was the only guy we had injured in that fight, thank God. We killed, as far as I know, three men.

Boyd: And luckily he was able to recover from that because he just got muscle shot?

Shepherd: It blew his bicep off, as much as I know. They wrapped him. I never even got to see him. I knew him. He was evacuated in a helicopter. The screaming, "medic!" – blood-curdling screams "medic!" – and here we are in this setting. And then this guy comes and pulls this crap, this boner on me. It was kind of unnerving there for the moment, but that's what it's like being a soldier. And that's just a private. My life, like a lot a soldier, you can imagine World War II, they were there until it was over over there, and that type of thing in World War I. My experience was this one here as an infantryman. At the end of the year, about seven of us that I could count completed the rotation, came back to the United States. I went into Special Forces then, because they had lowered the age limit. So I came back to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and got into the 82nd Airborne replacement company, and the very day several boys that preceded back said "Johnnie get out of here, this is almost-American Division. It's not all-American Division, AA Airborne, All-American Airborne. He said this was a bad gig here, and said get out if you can. Well, I had taken the Special Forces Test, I had good scores on it, and this guy, just as god would have it, a green beret walked down the hall. And I said, "Sergeant, Johnnie Shepherd. How do I get over to Special Forces." He said, "Well, you have to take the test." I said, "I took that test and I passed it." He said, "Come with me." [Laughing] They were hard up for people, too. He that day took me checked me out of that company and took me over to the Special Forces training group and I trained, subsequently, the next year. This is 1966 to '67. I trained and I became a Light and Heavy Weapons Specialist for an A team – a Special Forces A Team. I was promoted to Sergeant. By this time I was an E-4 and by the time I left Vietnam I was a sergeant. I was married. I married my sweetheart from high school.

Boyd: When you got back?

Shepherd: Well, we got engaged when I got back, and then that Christmas after getting back (that is December of '66 – I have to be careful, my son is just about that age). '66 we were married and she was a little redhead. She's the cutest thing you've ever seen. She's still my sweetheart, by the way. 39 years this December. We made a life together, by then I was pretty much getting out of training group. I was assigned to B Company, 7th Special Forces. That's the company with John Wayne, *The Green Beret*. Have you ever seen the movie?

Boyd: I have actually heard about it. I think I've seen clips of it.

Shepherd: You need to see the movie, now, Vietnam. Don't believe it, it's Hollywood. But

the thing that is important: at the very beginning, as Special Forces A Team marches on and they do a left face in front of a newsstand with news reporters and civilians in it, and they start off with the captain that speaks that there speaks in German, I think. Then, the sergeants, the team sergeant on down, there a few of them that talk. Then, the last one is the lieutenant, the ex. o. of the team – the twelve man A Team, that’s the most lethal package of humanity you’ve ever met. Those guys, all those guys except for the ex. o. – the lieutenant’s the movie star – all those guys are real Special Forces guys. Those are my co-workers at B Company, Special Forces. The captain wasn’t truly a captain. His name is James Chaplain. He’s the guy that convinced me to go to OCS, coached me into going into OCS, counseled me. All the sergeants down there knew I was under their arm to learn how to be a real soldier then, a Special Forces soldier. They are great guys. If I ever want to see them, I just watch the movie. I turn it off after that piece, the rest of it’s hookie. They did all the special effects and things – the parachuting and repelling and other stuff – for the movie with John Wayne.

Boyd: So they were the stunt doubles?

Shepherd: They were the stunt doubles for that movie. That’s what we did. That was the Special Forces. Then I was going to Ranger School in ‘68, and the U.S.S. *Pueblo* got seized in North Korea. Do you know about the *Pueblo*?

Boyd: No, I do not actually.

Shepherd: If you look on the ‘60s there, you are going to see a hysterical moment. North Korea seized the U.S.S. *Pueblo*, the United States Military’s Naval Intelligence ship around 1968. I was on the way to Ranger School and got pulled off of that and put on alert to deploy with my group to somewhere on the west coast. We never did deploy, we were on alert. I spent a lot of time on alert and never got to go anywhere in my military career. The *Pueblo* was seized and if you don’t know about that Bucher’s *My Story* is the most excellent of a hostile situation. *My Story* by Lloyd Bucher. He was a ship captain. That’s an excellent read, very easy read. Tense for a moment that they were going into captivity. Here, we thought we were going to have Vietnam going, and all of a sudden we’re fixing to have a war going with North Korea. Now, take it back in the context. The Cold War was still going on. Containment was the theory. Even when I was in Vietnam as a private, I knew we were fighting the individual on the other side, but I saw it as a war of containment. I don’t know how I recognized that other than just the history I told you about my life, being close and adjacent to military families. I saw it as the job was to kill Communists. That was our job, nothing personal, just didn’t like Communists. So here now, South Korea, North Korea, that’s inflamed because they seized the U.S. intelligence boat the *Pueblo*. They held our people almost a year and tortured them and did all kinds of things to them. If you on the take down of a ship, they only kill one person, I believe. But it was an intelligence vessel that was taken from the high seas, which in international law the definition is kidnaping. It’s piracy to approach a vessel on the high sea outside of international limits. And the *Pueblo* was taken from international waters by combat action of the North Koreans. They took our boat. You’ve got to know that, it fits in the time. It was important. I imagine it put

strategic thinkers on the edge of nuclear thinking, using nuclear weapons against North Korea. We were fighting a big battle at that point in January and February of '68. We were fighting a big battle in Vietnam: the Tet Offensive of '68.

We were on alert and stuff and I got pulled out of Rangers – off of orders from Ranger School – but I had put in an application for Officer Candidate School. And it came through, and I was pulled out of the unit and they did send me to Officer Candidate School in Fort Benning, Georgia. I went in as Infantry and I graduated in the end of the summer – October, I believe. The 20th or somewhere around that. October 20th of 1968, I was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant. High school diploma, you know, and I was a lieutenant. All my competition was West Pointers, and ROTC guys. There were a fair amount of OCS guys like me at that time. As a lieutenant, I had already been to Vietnam, not as a lieutenant but as a soldier. The other candidates in my company had not been, and they went to Vietnam on orders. They sent me to Germany. Because I Special Forces qualified, I was sent to the Special Forces detachment, Europe, in Germany. I had already been to Vietnam, so they sent me that way. But almost all my classmates went to Vietnam, and I lost touch with them. I went to Germany for a couple of years, and there – I hate swimming, but I'm good at it, unfortunately – and when I arrived there were three 2nd lieutenants, and the group commander asked us, he said, "I got three executive officer positions on three A Teams. I've got the mountain team, I've got the halo team (the high altitude, low-open free fall team which was what I wanted), and I've got the scuba team. Which one of you can swim?" The other two guys took a step back. I was the only one of the three that admitted they could swim. I couldn't swim great, but I was pretty okay. I wouldn't have drowned probably. I ended going to scuba school, to be on the scuba team. So there's a hell of a story, but that lead me to doing body rescues – people fall through ice and stuff and you have to go in and get their bodies out in the local German areas. I did a lot of para-scuba operations, parachute and scuba. Simulated combat. Trained the Greek Hellenic wading force. All of this and Vietnam is still going on, mindful of the fact. You see, when you are in Germany at that time, your enemy wasn't in Vietnam. Your enemy was across the Iron Curtain – the Soviet Union, East Germany, Yugoslavia, all that was under the Communist domain. So our focus in Europe was toward the Soviet Union.

Boyd: So you were looking at the larger Communist threat?

Shepherd: Exactly. It was still a battle of containment. Microcosms of wars, that molecular structure we talked about, the molecules. Vietnam was a molecule; Korea was a molecule. Greece in '48 was a molecule. The containment strategy as we begin – they would move and then we would counter-move and so forth. Well, Europe had been in an occupation situation since the end of the war and it had inflamed by virtue of the Soviet Union and so forth. So you can gain that kind of mental understanding, and you've got the history to know that. Our job there was to organize, equip, develop, and train. That's exactly what I was graded on: organize, equip, develop, and train 1500 guerillas, behind Communist lines. And that's what our Special Forces A Team's mission statement was then, and I suspect it is much like that today. The basic A Team of the Green Berets is to organize, equip, develop, and train 1500 guerillas and put into guerilla warfare behind the enemy's lines. So I trained with that and practiced that, but then one

day I came in and my wife was ready to leave me because I was always deployed somewhere. I was in Greece more than I was anywhere else. She was pregnant with our second child, and the fellows were talking about going to flight school. I said, "I haven't thought about it." They said, "Well, you know one other reason to want to go flight school is they need pilots right now, it's pretty easy to get in, and they pay more money than jump pay." Remember the 55 dollars? When I became an officer, it became 110 dollars. An officer got paid more. If they died, it's a greater loss I suppose. But then, to go to flight school is 175 dollars a month. So to fly them – I didn't even have to jump out of them – and I got more money. It made sense to me. I signed up. These four guys I signed up with, they applied for helicopters. They got them. I applied for airplanes, and I got it. They said, "You can't get airplanes. They need helicopter pilots." So we all came back out of Special Forces, back to Fort Rucker – well, Fort Strict, Georgia. I did, for fixed length, and they went out to Fort Walters, Texas, for rotary length, such was the Army's structure. Then, we all moved back to Fort Rucker and all went through our respective courses. I came out a six-wing rated Aviator, a commercial pilot's license for single engine/twin engine airplanes. Flying a twin engine airplane is so natural to me, I asked the army if I could be detailed into twin engine. They said yes. We have reconnaissance twin engine aircrafts. They put me into the RU 8-D, and that's the Airborne Direction Finding. That's like when somebody talks on a radio, you can actually locate them by shooting an asmiths to them. You have certain equipment and you move on, and then they come back up and talk a little bit and you can shoot another asmiths. Where those asmiths come across, you can actually triangulate their location.

Boyd: Oh, yes!

Shepherd: The airplanes moving. It's got radio detection equipment on board. The enemy used code [mimics something similar to Morse Code] and we would actually hone in on that and locate it, shoot an asmith to the transmitter, and then fly 90 degrees perpendicular to it until they'd come back up, cut back in on it, get another asmith, now we got what they call a cut. We've got two lines that lay over a piece of map that tells us – we know where we were, we have radar that tells us navigationally where we were – we know where we were, so we know where the asmith to the target was here from here. We know the asmith to the target was from here to here (I'm using fingers to illustrate). Where they cross is a cut, so there is some possibility he (the enemy) somewhere around the vicinity of that cut. Now what we try to do is get yet a third location and a third shoot, and when those things begin to stack up and one or two of them might go off stray like that; but where you get the preponderance of the stack-up, that's where the transmitter location is. Transmitters were for high headquarters. Little groups of soldiers didn't have these. So we were fighting the big guys, okay. I went to Vietnam flying twin engine reconnaissance Airborne Direction Finding. When you hear, there is all kinds of different technologies and stuff. What I had was very basic. It wasn't real flashy stuff. You go to the museum up at Fort Rucker, Alabama, you'll see the RU 8-D. It looks like a flying porcupine, antennas. I was a platoon leader. I had three or four RU 8-Ds.

Boyd: Now, this is when you went back in '72?

Shepherd: The second time. Thank you. Back in '71. I went back in March of '71 until March of '72, and flew radio reconnaissance (that's what they called it). But it was Airborne Direction Finding. And in fact, when the Communist made the big push – I want to say it was October or November of '71 – they made the first big effort to seize Saigon. I did the aerial mission that located the Kha Vin headquarters, which was the general in charge of all North Vietnamese Armies in the South. The guy that was the campaign manager as it were. We located his headquarters at night, the very night they came across the Cambodian border to begin their attack towards Saigon with Tah Nhin mountain, Tah Nhin which is a little village out from Saigon, and a big mountain that stands out. You could see this mountain from anywhere.

So did that kind of work and stuff. That was very interesting because I saw the war, yet, from a different perspective. I was up in an airplane, clean, had a shower every night, ate in mess hall.

Boyd: Had a bed.

Shepherd: Had a bed. Had air-conditioning. Oh, you bet, I had air-conditioning. It was kind of like —

Boyd: You were staying in Saigon?

Shepherd: We were — what's the name of that little place? I forgot the name. It was a little airstrip right outside of Saigon. Bear Camp was the little post that was north of it. We had Special Forces B Team located on the airfield. We had some other fixed winged airplanes, but it was more of an intelligence airfield. OB 1 Mohawks, RU H and RU 21 airplanes. Intelligence airplanes, you know. More like an intelligence center. I have forgotten the name of the little base there. I was the physical security officer. My job was the defense of our sector of the perimeter and everything, based on my past experienced in infantry and all that. It kind of fell into place. So I was a platoon leader and did that for a year, and had a lot of heroing and interesting experiences in airplanes, but saw the war from yet another different perspective, you see. Others that I'm sure you'll interview have had those things. I love talking about what it's like to be a soldier. All those little things like the snake over your legs, or the hot pepper. Like the guy that had ants dropped down his back and we had to evacuate him.

Boyd: What?

Shepherd: Ants build nests in trees and he was carrying ammunition on his backboard, and he bumped a tree limb and that whole nest of ants fell down on him. Big red ants. And they ate him up. We had to call in a helicopter to evacuate him. You see, those type of little life examples – great experiences for me. Those are delightful, even though it was harsh times and people were dying and getting wounded. The one-on-one experiences of these little things really are interesting to talk about and think about.

Boyd: Did you help you with your platoon leader experience?

Shepherd: Yes, just on knowing how hard it can be, you know.

Boyd: As being an infantryman —

Shepherd: Exactly. I probably garnered a lot of respect that I didn't deserve because I had a combat infantryman's badge. I have all my "I've been there" ribbons. Interestingly, at that time, the enlisted men didn't get medals. In my whole company, of all left, I told you seventeen, only one man got an award that wasn't the anything other than the Purple Heart — one enlisted man. Now, all the officers got Army Accommodation medals or something like that, but enlisted men, they didn't get nothing. Officers didn't take care of their troops. Officers were cliché or click, and they stayed amongst themselves and the troops survived. I wish I could be more polite in expressing that point, but that's true from the way I saw it. None of the guys, I can't believe it. Except for a guy named Sylvan. I think it was Sylvan. He was from Miami. His daddy owned a hotel down there, I believe. He got the Silver Star. He certainly deserved that, or more. Of my whole experience over there, I saw boys who get shot, and got wounded and got the Purple Heart. None of the people in my company ever got a medal. So we went through 365 days, '65 to '66. When I went back in 1971 to '72, everybody got something. You always wanted to give a soldier something. If they were good soldiers and did a good job, you gave them something.

Boyd: When I was looking at your biography that you sent me, I was looking at your military awards.

Shepherd: Well, there's a few of them. None of them are glorious awards. I've been there and did okay.

Boyd: Superior Service Medal. The Bronze Star. The Meritorious Service Medal. The Air Medal.

Shepherd: That's the flying tour over there. I want to say it was every twenty-five hours of combat hours, you got one air medal. I had like 17 or 16 of them.

Boyd: Yes, it says here 16.

Shepherd: 16, yes.

Boyd: And then the Army Achievement and the Army Accommodation Medal.

Shepherd: Right. [mumbles]

Boyd: This happened more in your second tour, than in your first tour?

Shepherd: Well, I became an officer! There's the point. [chuckles] Point made. Officers take care of officers pretty well. To be fair, though, a lot of officers think, especially I think if

you were to talk to my troops across time, if you could interview them, they would say, boy, they sure were glad to have an officer who had walked a mile in their shoes, who knew what it was like to be poor. I knew what it was like to be married to a beautiful young lady and have a family started, and not have enough to get to the last week of the month and have to save pennies. This sounds sad and everything, but to me it is growing in recollections. When I would come home, if I had change in pocket, we'd put it in a little dish, the first three weeks of the month. Then, the last week of the month – we always had food; Sandy always managed to make sure that we had food – but we couldn't go out. We couldn't buy gas; we couldn't do anything. But we had those pennies and nickels in dishes. And we would go out each night and buy a candy bar. We talked about candy bars. There's one other candy bar that competes. Back in those days (this is '66-'67), Three Musketeers got to be pretty long. I think they elongated, and you could cut it in half. But you still did not have the stay, or the long term tasting enjoyment, that you had out the Snickers.

Boyd: Because it didn't have caramel.

Shepherd: It didn't have the caramel and the peanuts. Sandy and I would literally take pennies, and take our son, and we would walk down to a Shop-Ed or something and buy a candy bar. That would be a big night out. That's what it's like to be a soldier.

Boyd: Your platoon understood. They saw that you struggled just as much as they did.

Shepherd: Well, my troops later on, they knew that I had been enlisted and I had come through. I had my cuts. Your credits come with Combat Infantryman's Badge. That's the highest award that can be given to a person. It's not the Medal of Honor. It's not to be confused with the Medal. Combat Infantry is a qualification. It's not that I did something. It's that you, at that time, were engaged in combat as an infantryman for a period of thirty days. You were then nominated for it, and received the Combat Infantryman's Badge. So I had a Combat Infantryman's badge. Not many aviators had a CIT; most aviators came by other paths and became aviators. I came out of the infantry and became an aviator. There were a lot of us, but not enough. It was rather rare to find two in a company. And I company might find one guy that had an aviator's CIV, Special Forces. I carried a lot of credit by virtue of those qualifications that probably I didn't deserve, but the troops always kind of looked up to them, you know. I could out run them, most all my troops. I don't ever think I have ever been outrun by a troop. I don't think they can do more push-ups or sit-ups at a time than I could do. I never asked them to do what I couldn't do, and I think they knew that. Kind of a hallmark of my leadership style was to respect them because of their circumstances. Each one was precious, precious responsibility. Their families to my command was a precious responsibility. They had the first level of responsibility, but I had the back up. I could go on in to non-Vietnam, but you don't care about the suicides of troops, husband-wife problems. The ugliest things that you can imagine in those areas of societies, I had experienced as a commander.

Boyd: So you had more duties than just a commander. You were not only their friend, you were

their psychiatrist —

Shepherd: Well, I never was their friends, per se. I was always the commander. That's the thing you have to remember: when you become a supervisor, you're no longer a troop. You have to enforce a certain manner in terms of relationships, according to your responsibility and authority. That's very important. Good leader recognize that. Some times people can't make that transition. I seem to have made it okay, but I never stopped respecting the difficulties of where I came from. I carried that as a badge that I fight in my commands across time, and I think most of my troops would agree to that. I always took pretty good care of the troops.

Boyd: In your second tour, did you lose any troops?

Shepherd: No, I just about lost some troops. I had an airplane fly into the ground one day. That was a bad thing! It was just a maintenance problem and they survived. They weren't hurt; they were scared. I told them to fix that, and go get us another airplane.

Boyd: Here's a question for you, moving a little bit past Vietnam, in the early '80s there was the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund and then the contest for the design, and then ultimately the memorial. Have you been to the Memorial?

Shepherd: Yes. I served in the Pentagon quite a long time, and it was right across the bridge. I used to run up on Capitol Hill and all of that, and I'd run by the memorial. And then they subsequently had the statues added.

Boyd: Yeah, the statues of the men and then the Army Nurse one, I think, they added.

Shepherd: Yes, I haven't seen it since then.

Boyd: Do you remember when you first saw it?

Shepherd: Yes.

Boyd: What was your reaction to it?

Shepherd: I didn't care much about it. You know, there are a lot people that are turned on by these monuments and things, and I think every county, maybe every city, probably needs a special place. It's not bad for the nation to have a special place, but as a person I think you can kind see that it's just not something, I not that sensitive to those types of things. I respect the need for them. I respect the names, most importantly, the names that are on it. And the difficulties and so forth, I am very sensitive to those types of things, but it's just not high on my list of important things. I was there when they unveiled the Wall, in fact. I went over for that. I couldn't even get in close, there was so many people. Nevertheless, it was very nice thing as a gesture. I have gone back several times to look at the Wall. While jogging I'd stop and look and

try to figure out some of the guys who were with us and stuff. Frankly, I've lost the names over time. Even then, I had lost the names over time. It's just a lot: a field of 50-some-odd- thousand names.

Boyd: Sometimes it just becomes overwhelming, just all the names.

Shepherd: And some of the names are the same. There's a couple of repeats there. You don't know which one. So it's a nice thing to have. A nation should have that to honor their dead. It's more important, probably, to the families of those people than it is to other people who may have coexisted during similar times and stuff, but ,again, I don't want to be judgmental about that other than to say that it's appropriate for a nation to pay respect. Let's not forget who have done these jobs and laid down there lives for our freedom. The interesting thing is though – backing out and putting it in context – where's the one for the Cold War? Every service member that died in the Cold War, who participated in the Cold War and died – Francis Gary Powers died in a helicopter crash, but he was a U2 pilot shot down in 1960 or '61 over the Soviet Union. Francis Gary Powers, his name's not anywhere and yet he was absolutely at the time, in the middle of the nuclear concerns, and the containment strategy. He was doing a mission. His U2 got shot down by a Soviet Missile and he was in prison for awhile. He was a CIA pilot. DO you know the story of Francis Gary Powers?

Boyd: No, I don't.

Shepherd: See there's other little threads, those little doors to open up. It's on that sheet somewhere that I handed you. It's right there on 1960, the very first U2 incident. May 1st, 1960, Francis Gary Powers was shot down over the Soviet Union doing his job in the name of the CIA. Where's the wall that could be large enough to put all the names of those service members who died in the Cold War? You would have to have a city. So there's a point of practicality about it, I don't mean to be goofy about it. There's a point of practicality, and to me, overall I respect the need for them, but I don't have much personal attachment to them.

Boyd: Well, it's just so different from the Korean War Memorial which be eerie at times, especially if you run by it. I know that some people have said that if it has been a really foggy morning and you walk past that, it really looks like the men and walking towards you and you really don't know that they are statues.

Shepherd: I can see how it would affect people like that.

Boyd: I was just wondering the different perspectives. I understand that you see it as more personal to the family member, and not necessarily to the servicemen who go to it.

Shepherd: I think it is important to anchor the nation's attention, and you do it physically, because everything is perishable in time. Our thoughts of World War II now are dying off, because the veterans are going away. World War I is but a fleeting thought. No one can

describe World War I. And there are so many other events that are entangled in our history that are respected. You have to just purposefully study these things, or you have to have lived through it with some degree of attention. I think I had a little attention to some of it, not a full understanding of any of it, but it's a composite. It's almost like a mosaic painting. That's what history is: a mosaic. Then, it can be a beautiful mosaic or it can be a mosaic with some certain flaws and things that history paints out itself. Molecule by molecule, it establishes itself in some form of molecular structure. I think history is kind of like that. It's fun thing. The important thing is (we had talked about it earlier) seems to me is to be able to be aware, not necessarily be an expert but to be aware of the events and then be able to take the time line and associate what might have come from that...

[Discusses national identity and structure until end of interview]

[End]