

Hank Billings
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Karen Navarro

LIBRE: My name is Matthew Libre ('21), and I'm joined here today with Henry, Hank?

BILLINGS: Hank Billings.

LIBRE: Hank Billings. Awesome. The date is August 8th, 2019, and we are conducting this interview with the Dartmouth Vietnam Project, an oral history project here associated with Dartmouth College, and we are in the [Baker-]Berry Library section of Dartmouth. And I just wanted to start by saying thank you so much for being here today.

BILLINGS: You're welcome.

LIBRE: I hope it was an easy trip over. Yeah, just to start, where and when were you born?

BILLINGS: I was born in Boston, Langan Hospital, August 21st—my birthday's coming up—1941. And when I get carded at the—Price Chopper cards you no matter how old you are, to buy a six-pack of beer, and I say, "I was born four months before Pearl Harbor. Do the math." [laughter]

LIBRE: Exactly. And describe growing up there. How was it?

BILLINGS: I grew up, it was a lower middle class family. My mother was a housewife and, you know, she was the typical 1950s wife that did all the stuff. My dad worked in the construction industry as a pipe coverer and a plasterer. And neither one had much in the way of education. So this was like a quantum leap, because I have a master's degree and stuff beyond that. But my mother went to the eighth grade and my dad made it out of the sixth grade. Neither one darkened the hallways of a high school. And so, but they provided for the four children very well.

It was, you know, and some of it now it's like Berkeley East. I mean, I don't know if you're familiar with the Boston area at all, but some of it was a lower middle class Irish, Italian

neighborhood. And now there's outdoor dining, there's comedy clubs. It's in between Tufts and Harvard University. And, so it's really yuppified. The house that I grew up in was sold for \$1,200. It's now on the market for, like, a million. So, that's what's changed in that neighborhood. And I went to public school. And after high school, which I graduated in 1959, I went to Wentworth Institute [of Technology, Boston, MA] to study technology, and I hated it, so I transferred to Northeastern University [Boston, MA], where I was in ROTC, because that was more or less an obligation. And after two years there—that was a five-year program, because I didn't go to school, and I dropped out of Wentworth. I went to work, so I didn't get to Northeastern until a year later. And that was a five-year program.

So basically, between the one year I dropped out and the five-year program, I was two years behind my high school class in terms of graduation. I should have graduated. So I transferred to the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and was able to finish that up in two years, so it was really only a five year gap. And then, after I left the University of Massachusetts in 1964, I decided to go to Europe, and I bought a one-way ticket.

LIBRE: One way.

BILLINGS: One-way ticket. Who buys a one-way ticket to Europe? But I did, and I said to myself I wasn't coming back if Barry Goldwater had got elected. Because in my college years I went in as a Nixon Republican in 1959, 1960, and I left as a left-wing Socialist, internationalist. [laughter] I was in all kinds of radical left groups at the time, like the United World Federalists and the International Club. And I'm the only ROTC cadet in history to get demoted from my cadet rank.

LIBRE: Can you explain that? There's a story behind that.

BILLINGS: Yeah, sure. Because I wore a peace button, went to ROTC class. Now, this is serious. [laughter] I was in my senior year, I was the second ranking cadet in a corps of 1,500, 2,000, something like that, and I was a cadet lieutenant colonel, which really means nothing. But I wore a—there was a Harvard professor running against Ted Kennedy, and he was opposed to the war in Vietnam and generally acknowledged as a peacenik, and I supported him. So I wore a "Votes for H. Howard Hughes" – not Howard Hughes.

I forgot his name now. It wasn't Howard Hughes, [laughter] that's for sure.

LIBRE: Stuart Hughes?

BILLINGS: Stuart Hughes, yes. And I got called on the carpet, and a professor of military science called me into his office. And he's a real colonel, and just assigned to the ROTC division, and he said to me in all seriousness, he said, "Are you proud of your uniform?" and I said, "Well, sir, it depends." And that was not the right answer. I said, "I'm proud of the uniform that freed us from the British. I'm proud of the uniform that ended slavery in America and the Civil War, and I'm proud of the uniform that the 'war to end all wars' and the fight for democracy in World War I and World War II defeating the dictators. But I was not proud of the uniform that destroyed the Native American population. And the war with Mexico was a fraud. Even Abraham Lincoln acknowledged that back in the 1840s. So I said, "It's a spotty record." And I swear to God, if he had had a gun, a loaded gun, he probably would have shot me dead on the spot. [laughter] Anyway, he said that blah, blah, blah, he wasn't happy, and I got demoted to a cadet major, which was fine with me. So...

I had a rough time with ROTC because my politics had radically changed. But I felt that I had a duty to my country. And I was opposed to the war very early, because when I went to Europe on that one-way ticket, I went to Portugal and just hitchhiked all over Europe for two months, and stayed in youth hostels, and talked to the French especially, after their experience in Vietnam. And I became convinced that *this is not a good idea for the Americans to get involved there.*

LIBRE: And was this—sorry, I guess before we jump right in, because we're moving in a great direction here, but your development politically, you said, you came into college as a Republican, you said?

BILLINGS: Yeah. I couldn't vote. I mean, the amendment hadn't been passed that allowed you to vote at 18. But I did have a "Vote for Nixon" placard out on the front of the lawn on the house.

LIBRE: And how exactly—were there some pivotal moments, some things in American history going on politically that you really...

BILLINGS: Well, when I got to college it was a lot of the—I studied [Senator Joseph R.] McCarthy closely, and that sort of turned me against that jingoistic aspect of the Republican Party. And the civil rights movement, as well, when I got into college. And I grew up in an integrated neighborhood. I went to summer camp at the age of 10, I guess, Groton School Camp in New Hampshire, and the three of us from the church. When one guy was black, nobody thought anything about it. It just was not an issue. And then when I finally got into the military, and we were down south, and you'd go to a nightclub in Baltimore and they'd say, "No niggers allowed here," you know, because I would go in with black guys, you know, like it was ordinary stuff. And that sort of radicalized me on the civil rights movement.

But, earlier than that, I was becoming more progressive as I studied economics and history. And I tried to hold onto my conservative positions. My uncle who lived downstairs was a rock-ribbed Republican, and he voted straight Republican. And he was the one I admired, because he had all the books. My dad read Western books and my mother didn't read anything but the newspaper. But my uncle downstairs had the entire collection of Mark Twain books, meaning everything that Mark Twain wrote. And he had other collections which I wanted, and I have today the entire collection of Mark Twain, because that's the one thing I wanted. [laughter] And, you know, it's a gradual... I can't pin it to a specific event, but I guess that's what college can do for you sometimes, it changes your outlook. And it did for me.

LIBRE: And going in did you know—how early on did you know that ROTC was going to be a thing for you, because obviously not everyone in college was doing that?

BILLINGS: I felt like I had an obligation to serve. And if I was going to serve, I wanted to be an officer. I didn't want to be an enlisted man. In that year between when I graduated from high school and I ended up at Northeastern, I had a friend, a childhood friend, my closest friend, and I asked him if he was interested in going into the Army together, and we could pick our specialty, if we were going to go in as privates, you know, and then you'd train yourself in whatever, airplane mechanics or whatever. And I was ready to do that at that time when I was 18, 19. But he said "no", thank God. He said

“no”, and then I went back to school, and then I slowly evolved with what I was saying about the history and economics and things like that, sociology, psychology, a liberal arts education in a business school. I majored in business, but I took as many liberal arts courses as I could take. And I changed. And by 1963, when I went to U Mass, I was a raging liberal, tree hugger, snowflake. [laughter] It doesn't hurt me when you say that. It doesn't hurt me at all.

LIBRE: Clearly. And describe the feeling of being a tree hugger, raging liberal, as in your words, amongst other people in the ROTC program? How did your peers view you? Did they see these...

BILLINGS: Some of them were like me. Some of them were like me, but I was on the extreme end. So, I generally stayed away from my ROTC. I once pledged a fraternity at U Mass. I was recommended by another ROTC guy. And I don't know if you're in a fraternity, so I don't want to tread on toes here. But, I joined a fraternity, and I lasted 12 hours. I pledged. And they had pretty silly things that I didn't quite go along with, and so I quit. And the guy who recommended me never spoke to me again, and he was in ROTC, and that was fine with me. I was into my Henry David Thoreau period. [laughter]

LIBRE: A lot of things going on.

BILLINGS: I didn't want to march to the beat of somebody else's drums. [laughter]

LIBRE: So, yeah, describe you're in Europe, when you were there, I guess you were still developing politically, and you're starting to see about getting [inaudible]

BILLINGS: Yeah, I stayed at youth hostels, and I hitchhiked. I had very little money, so I hitchhiked and stayed at youth hostels, and I met a variety of people. And we went from Lisbon to Madrid to Barcelona, ended up in Rome. I had a good contact in Rome because...

LIBRE: Tell me about that.

BILLINGS: It was James [S.] Ackerman, who was a very famous art professor at Harvard University. My mother cleaned toilets and cleaned the house for them. But he liked me. He thought

I was an up and coming something or other. And, so he was on sabbatical in Rome, so we were able to stay in Rome with him. And I met a friend in Portugal, in Lisbon, and we hitchhiked together, a guy named Jim Lakso. And I actually Googled him just, oh, I don't know, three months ago, and I found out he passed away a year ago. We hitchhiked, imagine this, with American flags dangling from our wrists, because people would slam on their brakes and stop. They wanted to talk to an American. They wanted to practice English. They wanted to talk about the death of [John F.] Kennedy, which had occurred the year earlier.

And it was wonderful to be an American between the time of, well, Kennedy's election and our involvement in Vietnam. But it was a wonderful time to be an American. So, I hitchhiked all the way around there and ended up in the lowlands of Denmark. And then I eventually flew home and became a ski bum at Mount Snow [VT]. And I put off—at this time I was putting off my actual entry into the Army as late as possible. And if I had gone in from—I graduated from U Mass in June, or May of the year. Hubert Humphrey was the commencement speaker in 1964. If I'd gone in immediately, I would have avoided Vietnam altogether. I would have gone to Germany. They didn't send units over until '65, if you know. I mean, they sent over the Marines in Da Nang in the spring, and I was there by Christmas of 1965. But if I'd gone in right out of '64, I would have gone to Germany or someplace in the United States. But I put it off as long as I could, ski bummed in southern Vermont at Mount Snow. I skied with Paul Newman one day, because he stayed at the place that we were at.

LIBRE: There's got to be a story there.

BILLINGS: Well, it was no story there. [laughter] He was a great skier and I was, you know, just learning to ski. And you'd go to the nightclub, and everybody flocked around Paul Newman. I said, "I'll see you later." [laughter] You know, I don't want that kind of competition. So then I ended up late April, that was as far back—of the next year, '65, that I had to report to Fort Benning [GA] for infantry training. And that was a whole other ball of wax, because now you've got this screaming liberal. And, you know, I kept my politics to myself. I mean, I did what had to be done. But, I was an excellent student. So, after, it was like, oh, I want to say basic training at Fort Benning, probably eight weeks. And at the end of two

weeks, which was all classroom work, I was number one in the class. And then, when it got into the field exercise and crawling through the mud and all that stuff, my ranking slowly started drifting south. And I still finished in the top half, but I just wasn't into a lot of that stuff. And I think I wrote it in the book, but they did this "escape and evasion."

LIBRE: Yeah. Run through this, this was...

BILLINGS: Oh, boy that was...

LIBRE: If I'm next to you here, [inaudible]

BILLINGS: [laughter] Well, "escape and evasion" is like your final exam. And the idea is you get dropped off at dusk, and then you have to infiltrate through enemy territory for, I don't know, four or five miles, and then, if you get through, and it's code words and passwords, and you had to reach a certain destination on the other side of this block of enemy territory. And you get there, you pass. If you get captured, you go to a POW camp and you get treated as a POW for a few hours, and maybe a little bit of abuse. And I didn't want any part of that, and I wanted to mock it, because the two sessions earlier a friend of mine at Harvard that we met, I'd met at summer camp at Fort Devens, his father was I think the American ambassador to Switzerland, some very high ranking. He's a big movie producer out in Hollywood now.

And he wrote to me and said that one of the young guys like me, young 2nd lieutenant in basic training, was tossed out of the back of a truck and broke his back. So there was an IG [Inspector General] investigation. And the next cycle, the cycle between Dmitri Valard's his name and my cycle, they sent the Inspector Generals out of the IG to make sure that there was no more abuses. Well, after one cycle, they went home. So we were told we're not being watched anymore, we're back to things as normal. Well, I didn't like that. So anyway, I protested in only the way that I could protest, because nobody else was going to join me.

So you had maybe 160 guys. 159 of them are in black face, because they got all of their stuff on and they got that hat and everything's taped down, nothing is jingling or jangling, everything's... So they look very stealth, except for one guy, me. I had a white tennis flop hat on with "Ranger", bright shiny face, open canteen, everything was clanking, and they

got into my face, obviously, because we hadn't even started the exercise. We hadn't even left the barracks area. "We're gonna get you. And we're gonna make you suffer." I said, "You gotta catch me. You gotta catch me." I really—I don't know what I was thinking, because they could have killed me.

LIBRE: Tell me what was running through your head?

BILLINGS: I just wanted to—I just didn't believe that this was necessary. It probably was a necessary exercise. It was probably a great exercise. I just didn't want to be any part of it. And so anyway, they said they were "going to give special awards whoever catches Lieutenant Billings," you know. "He's an asshole." I'm sorry. [laughter] But, so we get to the drop off zone, and all the people start going through the enemy territory, and you can hear them being captured. I just said, "I'm going the other way." [laughter] I went and I just slept. I just found some nice hollow, covered myself with leaves, and waited until 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning before I even started.

And you figured that with this five-mile enemy zone—I forgot the exact distance—it was something like five miles—and that there would be phase lines, and they'd slowly move back as people started filtering through. So, by 2:00 in the morning I figured it'd probably be pretty safe to go down the road. So I just started going down the road. And I found a couple of other stragglers. And we were very quiet and moving stealthfully in our white tennis flop hat. And around 5:00 or 6:00 in the morning that the exercise was ending at 7:00, we were walking along and I picked up two or three others and we started singing, "We shall overcome." [laughter] And all of a sudden this truck comes roaring up behind us, and we just took off into the woods. And they said, "Don't worry. The game is over." You know, they were lying, because I knew the game didn't end until 7:00, and this was like 5:30, 6:00 in the morning.

So, we were running out and they came charging after us, and one of the guys—in Georgia, I don't know if you've ever been in Georgia, they have these things called waderman vines. They're like trees that grow together and you tripped, and they caught them and they thought they had me, because I could hear, "I've got you now." And I just kept going. And then, I don't know what happened to him. I guess

they realized their mistake. And it was too late to send him to the POW camp.

But this is an exercise that was worth 30 points to graduate, because they always held the threat over you that if you flunk out, you lose your commission and you get drafted as an enlisted man as a private. So you didn't want to flunk out. And this was worth 30 points, and I don't remember the total that you needed, but I knew that I didn't need the 30 points, so I was perfectly happy to take a zero, which I did. But when they got everybody back at the assembly area after 7:00, I got chewed out for not playing by the rules. I said, "You didn't catch me. Your goal was to catch me and you didn't catch me."

And there were other things like that. They'd go through bayonet drill, and everybody would be in the bleachers jumping up and down, saying "kill, kill, kill." And I refused. I'm just looking at them, I said, "You idiots, what are you jumping up and down saying 'kill, kill, kill' for." So they saw my attitude and they called me out and forced me to jump up and down in front of everybody saying "kill, kill, kill." But I was such a pacifist, and we had bayonet drill, I didn't take the scabbard off the bayonet. [laughter] They all had their scabbards off and they were sticking these straw dummies, and I still had the scabbard on. "What are you, afraid to hurt somebody, Lieutenant?" [laughter] So, that gives you an idea of where we were coming from. I just... And then...

LIBRE: What was your treatment, as a result of this? Did people treat you differently

BILLINGS: Oh, no, yeah, I had all kinds of guys that wanted to go a couple of rounds. But I managed to talk them out of it. I'm a likable guy in the end. [laughter] But, and then when we sailed to Vietnam, it was even worse, because I'd started an opinion poll. [laughter]

LIBRE: Tell me about that.

BILLINGS: Well, it was called the "Billup poll" as like Gallup poll. And I would say things that—"Are you in favor of capital punishment? Do you support John Lindsay?" who was running for mayor of New York. I forgot what the questions were, but it was a political thing that they didn't think was appropriate. I probably am the—they gave you efficiency

reports on sailing to Vietnam. I mean, you did nothing. I mean, you ate food, you played cards, you sat on the deck, you know, sunbathing, they'd show you a movie at night, *Beach Blanket Bingo* kind of movies. And, so you couldn't flunk—you couldn't get a bad efficiency report, but I managed to get one because of my attitude. But a few guys, you know, they'd bump you in line, things like that, but not too bad.

But I got lucky, I gotta tell you, because when I was at Northeastern, each ROTC branch, each university, at least in those days, specialized in a particular branch of the Army, because I was in Army ROTC. And when I was at Northeastern you specialized, you were a signal corps, which was communications. But when I transferred to U Mass, something I didn't calculate at the time, they were armor. There's three combat branches in the military: artillery, infantry and armor. And I was going to be a tank commander in Vietnam. That would have been a trip. But, for some reason—I never really got the answer. I guess they were looking for gung ho volunteers, because this is '64. When I graduated, they asked me what branch I wanted to be in. You weren't automatically in armor, which had been the case. So I said, "How about intelligence?" And I got it. I got intelligence, which was—James Bond movies at the time were coming out, so I asked for...

LIBRE: That was your inspiration?

BILLINGS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. James Bond. *Goldfinger* was out in 1963, and *[From] Russia with Love* I think came out at that time, Sean Connery.

LIBRE: And as a self-proclaimed pacifist, did that speak at all to your decision, wanting to be...

BILLINGS: I wasn't a full-blown pacifist. I was not in Gandhi mode. I mean, I would have fought for the Union in the Civil War. I would have fought in World War I. I would have fought in World War II. The Revolution, I assume I would have fought in that, as well. No, I was not a pacifist. There were some things that I would definitely fight for, so I was not a pacifist. I just did not like the military. I didn't like what it did to you as an individual. So, it took away your... Their idea was to break you down, and then rebuild you as a universal soldier. And when I was ski bumming at Mount Snow, I mean, there

were folk songs, and oh, God, that scene at that time was wonderful. It was Joan Baez and all of the folk singers singing against the war. I had long since been against the war, but I still felt an obligation to my country to serve.

LIBRE: The obligation is to your country, you feel like?

BILLINGS: Yeah.

LIBRE: It wasn't to your family, it wasn't to...

BILLINGS: No, no, no, no, no. I felt an obligation to country and I knew I owed them two years of service. And after the war and long gone far beyond that when I became a writer, I would write in favor of a draft.

LIBRE: Really?

BILLINGS: Yeah. I approve of the draft, because otherwise you just get the people who have few other choices to do the fighting for us. I very strongly felt that if the country goes to war, everyone has to pay a price. I remember when I was teaching, going in as a guest lecturer at Lebanon High School, and the Iraq War was on, and I said, "How many of you aware in favor of the Iraq War with the United States?" And nobody raised their hand. I said, "Well, what are you doing about it?" Nothing. Because they didn't have to pay. They didn't have to face the price. There's no draft, when in the Vietnam War there was a draft. Everybody was involved. Everybody ran a risk of being drafted, going to Vietnam, and potentially dying.

But, we now have these antiseptic wars where you go on and live your life. You know, after 9/11, "hey, just act normal, because nothing's happening." We'd been attacked. That's why one of my heroes is Tillman. I don't know if you're familiar with this. He was a defensive back for the Arizona Cardinals, and he had this love of his country. And he gave up professional football to go play. And the guys in World War II. Ted Williams, Bobby—all those guys served in the military because baseball was secondary. But we've got it now with the volunteer Army, and God bless them, I mean. But, when you go to war, everybody has to pay a price.

And that's, if I can just be a little political, that's what drives me batshit about Donald Trump. Now, I know lots of people

who avoided service in Vietnam. I know a guy who pleaded conscientious objector. But he had to go through the humiliation of that interview. My brother, through connections at MIT, was able to get into the National Guard. And he was prime. I mean, he was five years younger than me. He would have been right up there in 1968, in there. But he was able to get into the National Guard and never having to serve. And there were people who went to Canada. I'm a Canadian-American. I could have gone back to Canada in those days and reclaimed my Canadian citizenship. People went to Sweden. They paid a price, right? They either gave up their citizenship, or a good poker friend of mine went to jail, went to Dartmouth when they occupied the building. He spent 28 days in jail with some very sketchy characters, he tells me, in the next cell. I mean, he was a Dartmouth guy. I guess it was 1967 when they occupied the building as they did in Columbia.

LIBRE: Parkhurst.

BILLINGS: Yeah. So, but all those people paid a price. And I have no problem with any of those people. But I have a problem with Donald Trump, because he faked an injury. He faked that bone spur. Instead of just shutting up about it, you know, and not mentioning it, he goes on to mock POWs like John McCain, mock Gold Star families. I mean, please. I despise him for that, and for several other reasons. But, I despise him especially for that. I mean, he didn't want to serve and he insulted those who did serve. Because when he had the interview with his attorney, [Michael] Cohen, and Cohen testified, and Donald Trump said to Cohen, "What do you think, I'm stupid?" Because "why didn't you serve in Vietnam?" "What do you think, I'm stupid?" Well, what does that imply? That everybody who did serve was stupid. So, I've had enough of Donald Trump.

LIBRE: Yeah, take me back to, so you were in Fort Benning, Georgia.

BILLINGS: Right. That was infantry school.

LIBRE: And then, at this point you had already—did you choose to—you got the choice to be part of the intelligence division after this or prior?

BILLINGS: You know, I'm not positive. I think I had it before that.

LIBRE: And so where did you go? What unit were you a part of and what education was there after Benning?

BILLINGS: Okay. After Fort Benning, you're not a member of any unit. You're just in basic training. I went to Fort Holabird in Maryland, just outside of Baltimore, and that was intelligence school. And we did not know—this was, well, it was a variety of things that we used to talk about. But we talked about why Vietnam was important, why we must win in Vietnam, that it was the rice bowl of Asia, and if the Communists take over the rice bowl of Asia, they'll be able to feed themselves and have time over to launch war against us. I mean, I'm saying that if they're happy and feeding themselves, why would they have to go to war? It's usually people who have very little to lose that are super aggressors like Hitler. So I wasn't buying a lot of that stuff.

But, it was a lot of classroom work. This was not field stuff. Most of it was just propaganda classes and classes on history and classes on Vietnam, and it was like six or eight weeks. It was after that that we were then transferred—and I then became a member of the 519th MI [Military Intelligence] battalion, MI is military intelligence. And we were at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. And then, from there, we still didn't know whether we were going to go to the Dominican Republic, which was a thing that was going on at that time, because some of us thought... Very few of us actually thought we actually were going to go to Vietnam. I mean, they did send over the Marines in late, I want to say March or April of '65, to Da Nang.

But, there was no military intelligence unit. We were the first ones to go. And we set sail out of, we went from Fort Bragg to Charleston, South Carolina, and we sailed through the Panama Canal up to Long Beach, California, and we changed ships there. But we brought all our equipment with us. You know, the people who replaced us flew directly to Vietnam, and were there, you know, in a day-and-a-half. But we brought all our supplies with us. And even then I had no idea what my job would be. I knew I was 519th.

And we went and we stayed in tents outside of Saigon for, I don't know, a couple of weeks. And some of us were assigned to sector intelligence advisors, guys going out into the boondocks to advise South Vietnamese ARVN [Army of

the Republic of Vietnam] forces on how to wage a war or whatever. I mean, like we knew what waging a war in the jungle paddies of South Vietnam was going to be like. And some of us were sent to Tan Son Nhat Air Base and were put into various study sections. And there was like order of battle, and then there was intelligence, and there were a variety... strength of the enemy. There were a variety of different positions. But I worked in the research and analysis branch. And it was like an office job. It was like working here.

LIBRE: And tell me about the experience of first seeing Vietnam from the ship and going up—were you going up the river?

BILLINGS: Yep, up the Saigon River.

LIBRE: And going up the Saigon River. Tell me about what were your feelings, your thoughts, as you approached...

BILLINGS: I was excited. I mean, I love the idea of travel.

LIBRE: You saw it as travel?

BILLINGS: Yeah, I saw it as an adventure. At this time, I still didn't know where I was going, but I was saying, *Wow, this place looks really cool. I mean, this whole French Colonial architecture.* And then we were told that the Viet Cong were going to blow up our ship, so that sort of put a damper on it. So they dropped these little percussion grenades over the side to stun anybody, any Viet Cong frogman that was attaching explosive devices, because we had heard a rumor—now there was a rumor, I don't know; the military's loaded with rumors—that the Viet Cong were going to “sink the spook ship,” “spook” for a spy. That's an old term for, they would call spooks spies. And nothing happened. And the very first thing I did when we got off the ship after we spent the night in our tents was go to the *Bob Hope Show*.

LIBRE: Tell me about that.

BILLINGS: Well, it was like the day before Christmas, and it was 95°, and he had all these dancing beauties up on the stage, and General Nguyen Cao Ky, the Air Force general who was then in charge of the South Vietnamese government.

LIBRE: Yeah, talk about that...

BILLINGS: Yeah, a super, yeah, a real punk, who would scrape—he had this beautiful wife, and she was a model of some kind. But the people hated him, I mean, they had no use for him at all. And anyway, then I got assigned to the research and analysis branch, and my first job was to rewrite an overblown report of B-52 attacks. These are B-52 attacks in South Vietnam.

LIBRE: Inside?

BILLINGS: Yeah, they were later on, when I went back to Vietnam many years later to do a bike ride from Hanoi to Saigon, they had downed B-52 planes on exhibit at some of the war memorials outside of Hanoi. But, that was my first assignment. Then I had—I had three areas of expertise, if you will.

LIBRE: Yeah, tell me about them.

BILLINGS: One was B-52 attacks, where I had to rewrite. I did the first comprehensive yearly assessment of B-52 attacks in South Vietnam. Somebody had written a six-month preliminary attack [sic], and described it as the most horrifying, terrifying weapon in the history of mankind, and they said, “This is way over the top. You have to write a more reasoned response.” By that time we had six more months of data, so I was able to write the B-52 assessment from June of '65 to June of '66. And my other area was Cambodia, and Viet Cong morale. And so I wrote studies on all three of those things.

LIBRE: And tell me about the data, which just to start, because obviously you started with the B-52 campaign, how did you kind of feel going into it, and did you have any expectations about anything you'd learned about the US government and the military and the structure itself as a result of doing this project? And what kind of data were you seeing?

BILLINGS: Well, we would get after action reports, and they would say “roads interdicted and caches destroyed.” But, in order to get accurate figures, you had to have ground follow-up to look on the ground, and there was very little of that. So, most of these B-52 attacks, which was really my specialty, these planes were flying in from Guam in those days, in the early days. Later on they flew in from Thailand. But, they would fly in from Guam in waves of three B-52s, and they'd drop bombs on a designated section, make a left-hand turn, go

back to Guam and have a softball game that night. I mean, they were at 30,000 feet. They were in no danger whatsoever unless they hit each other, because the Viet Cong did not have any kind of aircraft in South Vietnam. Now, they did in North Vietnam, because they had the SAM missiles. But in South Vietnam, it was a very safe way to... And the military wanted me to say that these weapons are extremely effective, they're destroying enemy morale, they're interdicting the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and they're scaring the bejesus out of the Viet Cong, and it's going to destroy their morale. There was no evidence of that whatsoever.

LIBRE: None?

BILLINGS: None. Zero. In fact, it was oftentimes the opposite. I mean, it's just common sense. You get these people bombing villages. And the Viet Cong were never there. The only time we actually had dead Viet Cong, and I forget the name of the battle, but the only time B-52s actually came in in what they called close combat support, instead of flying at 20- or 30,000 feet and dropping bombs from way up, they actually came down close to the deck like a fighter plane, and came in in support of relieving Chu Lai maybe. I forgot the name. But that was the only time. And they were able to, because they were in support of infantry right on the spot, they were able to find some dead enemy bodies, a half a dozen or a dozen, I forgot. But that was it. Everything else was guesswork.

LIBRE: Was there falsification of data, you mean?

BILLINGS: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

LIBRE: Explain that, what you mean...

BILLINGS: Well, look it. I mean, as Ken Burns points out in his documentary, and we knew at the time, when they were reporting—Walter Cronkite would have a screen behind him and would report NVA, North Vietnamese Army, Viet Cong, South Vietnamese, American casualties. Nowhere on there was civilians. Any dead Vietnamese was an enemy. So, we inflated the numbers, and they said that these people were all enemies and we killed them all, or whatever the numbers were. But we actually had no specific information. And besides, the Viet Cong weren't there, as I just said. They had ships out in the South China Sea, junks, that could see the

planes coming in from Guam. And they were not, you know, tricky. They were just moving around, they were just [makes a sound] drop, drop, drop, and then head back. And they could say that you could expect bombing raids along this particular line, and they would get out of there. They'd go into dugouts.

So anyway, the bottom line of the B-52 study was, the original title was "The Effectiveness of B-52s." And I said, "That's the wrong title. I have a better title: 'The Effects of B-52s,'" which had a total different meaning, because "effectiveness" establishes the case that they're wonderful weapons and they're wiping out the enemy. "Effects," well, that could be that you're destroying villages and you're creating more Viet Cong than you are destroying. And that's the argument that I tried to make, and I got... An Air Force major came in and said, "How dare this punk lieutenant change the title of this research?" And my major defended me. He said, "That's his title. It stays."

LIBRE: Who was your major?

BILLINGS: Major Strongrinis. I've forgotten his first name. But, he defended me. And Lieutenant Colonel Gillowin, who was even above him, supported me, as well. And it became known as "The Effects of B-52s". It became a top secret document. And when Roger McCloskey was running for the Senate or the House of Representatives in California in 1972, I said, "You've gotta get a hold of..."—because he was anti-war—I said, "You have to get a hold of my study." So I sent him—and I guess they didn't have the Freedom of Information Act at that time, so he couldn't get the study. But, and I don't know where it is right now.

LIBRE: Would be great to get your hands on.

BILLINGS: Anyway.

LIBRE: And sort of just... running that study, what was it like then going home after, say, the day's work, and you go—because you were living in Saigon then, correct?

BILLINGS: Right.

LIBRE: And can you explain your living arrangements and your day-to-day life as a, I think at one point you called it a Saigon warrior? Or is that the name?

BILLINGS: Yeah, yeah.

LIBRE: Not on the front lines.

BILLINGS: Right, right. I don't talk to combat experiences. All I had... However, we did live in an apartment on Truman Yang Street. It's now a market. I went back there years later. I had an apartment. We rented an apartment, and initially there were six of us living there, and then two of the guys moved out, so there was four of us. And we were issued one clip for our M-1 rifles. And I remember during the spring when the Buddhist demonstrations, when they had huge Buddhist demonstrations, we were out there sprawled spread eagle with one clip, the four of us, [laughter] overlooking Truman Yang, which was a main thoroughfare. We were on a side road off to the side, and there were concertina wires and fires and trucks on fire.

So I mean, but so most of the time we went around in civilian clothes. If you wanted to go, you got a bicicleta, I mean, a bike—I forget what they call them now, but you sit in the front, and the guy bikes you to work. And sometimes you get in a cab or a motorcycle and they take you. So, I mean, transportation was available all the time. And yeah, I worked seven days a week from either 7:00 in the morning to 7:00 at night or 7:00 at night to 7:00 in the morning. So you worked 12 hour days seven days a week. I mean, the guys in the field were working 24 hours a day. So, that was a pretty soft schedule even though it was, what, 84 hours a week, something like that. But yeah, and then we wrote our stuff up and then we went home. As I said, I played golf, I played tennis, I went swimming. So it wasn't arduous in that sense. But there were, you know, the attractions of night life in Saigon.

LIBRE: Tell me about this.

BILLINGS: Well, you could go in and you could buy a young lady Saigon tea, and then they had a movement against it, STIF, "Saigon tea is fini." But, you know, sometimes you would invite them back to the house, and the South Vietnamese police did not like that. They did not like Americans dating or going out with

South Vietnamese women, because they're really quite attractive, and they wear those ao dais, which is they say it covers everything and conceals nothing. But, one time we had some young ladies over to the house, and the White Mice is what they're called, because they wore white uniforms...

LIBRE: Yeah, why were they...

BILLINGS: And they stuck barrels through the gate... We were worried about sabotage. At one time we had a Jeep, and you drove the Jeep into the living room, and there was a big, big gate, you know, one of those corrugated things that opens and closes, and you actually parked the Jeep for safety sake in the living room, and we all slept upstairs, and then we closed it. But there were little slats, little holes, and all of a sudden these gun barrels are pointing through the holes at us, and it's the White Mice. And they weren't going to do anything, they weren't going to mess with us, but they wanted the girls out. So, I mean, there was night life. There was a lot of bar hopping and...

LIBRE: Yeah, how did it feel in that moment? What were the South Vietnamese people's standing, like their relationship with you as Americans? Did you feel like what you did, say, you had spoken about in Europe whether if you had an American flag, that you belonged. Did you feel welcomed?

BILLINGS: No, no. I mean, there were some very nice people, obviously. But, I remember one particular exchange I had with a bartender at the Continental. Are you familiar with the Continental? It's right in downtown Saigon. It's a very, very famous hotel, *the* most famous hotel. Maybe the Rex is equally famous. But the Continental was certainly the most famous hotel during the French occupation. That's where all the press guys and all the novel writers would gather. And I was there and I'm saying to him, "Why don't you—you're here serving drinks and you have girls and you have music—why don't you go out and fight the Viet Cong? This is your country after all." And I swear to God he said, "Nah, I'm happy here. You go fight Viet Cong. I stay here." And he's a Vietnamese, a young guy, probably 20 years old. And I'm saying, "Well, screw you, buddy."

LIBRE: Yeah, how did that make you—

BILLINGS: Yeah, well, I already knew how I felt about this, but that just confirmed... "This is your country, pal. This is your struggle. This is not my struggle." If the people of South Vietnam want to have a Communist form of economy or a Socialist, that's up to them. That's up to them. It's not for us to impose our capitalist ideas, our ideas of what freedom constitutes. And then, it was so far away from any ideal that we might think of as Americans to begin with, because it was totally corrupt. The Catholic minority, which was a very small minority, ruled the country, because they associated with the French, who were largely Catholic. And the Americans came in and they saw this Catholic minority who were French educated, spoke fluent English. "Those are our guys." And the Buddhists, the peasants, you know... So, I mean, we met people who were French, Frenchophiles [Francophiles]. I mean, the woman that I rented, or we rented the—spoke perfect, fluent French. I mean, they were the landowners, the property owners. And, so I mean, it was strange. I mean, we were not in a combat situation, but there were dangers.

LIBRE: Tell me about the dangers.

BILLINGS: Well, there was Saigon Sally, who would put a claymore mine on the back of a motorbike and park it near where GIs would get on a bus, and trigger it from a distance. So, there were mines and bombs. On April Fools Day, the Viet Cong blew up the Victoria Hotel. And I had had, the night before I had had drinks with a Navy commander, and he was in the hotel. He wasn't killed, but he was in the hotel. And they blew it up as an April Fools Day joke on us. So, there were bombings and there were random shootings. So, it wasn't safe in that sense.

LIBRE: How did you feel? Did you feel...

BILLINGS: When you went to a bar, you never sat by a window. You always sat at the far end of the bar with your back to the wall, so you could see the street from a distance. But, you wouldn't dine outside. You always would stay in a safe spot. And you generally went with somebody else. You didn't travel the streets by yourself. And, so there were those kinds of dangers, but you could avoid the dangers for the most part if you'd just use common sense and didn't go out alone and didn't go out after dark, or if you did, you went with a larger group of people.

- LIBRE: And did that change at all? Did you feel any sense of, not mistrust of people around you, but did you not feel like you could necessarily trust everyone who you were with?
- BILLINGS: You know, I thought I could trust a lot of people. I went to the barbershop, and this guy would—they would snap your neck. They would crack your neck. They could have killed me. Yeah, they could have paralyzed me with just a [makes a noise]. But they would do that. *Okay, this is something Asian, you know, okay. This must be something local.* But, we find out later—I had no idea just how many Viet Cong sympathizers were infiltrating into Saigon. I mean, they had very famous people that we thought were on our side that turned out to be Communist sympathizers all along. I mean, they were there. They infiltrated the entire city. So, you could have been poisoned at any time. There was an ice factory where they would make big blocks of ice for the restaurants, and there was a rumor that there were shards of glass in the ice, because they knew that only the Americans would have ice in their drinks. So, I mean, there was always that. And they blew up the floating restaurant where I went to several times.
- LIBRE: What was the floating restaurant?
- BILLINGS: I forgot the name of it, but it was a restaurant that was built out over the Saigon River, and I don't know if it was actually a floating restaurant, but it was out over the water and they blew that up. And there were random bombings like that, random shootings, random terrorist attacks. But, you learned to live with it and I never really said, "I'm not going to go out today because I'm afraid I'm gonna get attacked." It was never that. You'd get used to it. But it was staggering, though, scary to reflect back on how many people would have killed me if they had the chance.
- LIBRE: And did you feel like there was two different worlds between where you were living and spending your time at night on the streets going out to dinner and getting drinks, and at the airport where you were working? Did that feel like a totally different world being there?
- BILLINGS: Yeah, I mean, because I lived in the city among regular Vietnamese people. Yeah, that was different. When you're on the air base, you're surrounded by military personnel and guns, and I mean, you would see... I mean, they bombed

the air base one night when I was there. And I was under my desk writing up my report when the bombs were flying overhead. And when you got up, when you got out when the attack was over, you went out and you could see the planes that were, they looked like fish heads had been knocked off, some of the accuracy. And I always wondered: if they really were good terrorists—see, the Viet Cong were not very good terrorists, at least in my imagination—if they really, really wanted to be good terrorists, they had Pan American flights taking people home, soldiers who had finished their tour, and it's a very vast plane—I mean, it's an airport—and they were able to attack this airport and knock off planes and some buildings. How easy would it have been to shoot a Pan Am out of the sky with a machine gun or a hand held rocket launcher. And then, you talk about depressing, your morale. You'd have 250 guys on a plane all jumping for joy because they were heading home, and all of a sudden they get hit with a rocket launcher and boom, you're dead. I've always thought that that would have been the greatest terrorist kind of attack you could possibly launch, would be to shoot down those Pan Am planes. And they never did.

LIBRE: Do you know any reasons why you think?

BILLINGS: Oh, I don't know. I don't know. I'd have to get inside the mind of the... But that brings me up to that one of my studies was Viet Cong morale. And they wanted to say—and if you see the Ken Burns' thing in that '66, they wanted to show that we were breaking their morale. We couldn't win the war with just air strikes. They admitted that. And of course they admitted that much earlier than any of us knew at the time. But, we could break their morale with bombing and with active infiltration of our infantry. And one of my jobs was to read captured enemy documents, because I was writing a report on enemy morale and I needed to find quotes, "I really missed my little baby" or "my aunt and uncle and my grandparents," you know, letters that would indicate they were homesick. And this was North Vietnamese soldiers, as well as Viet Cong. And I'm saying, *Jesus, I mean, if they read my letters going home, they'd say the American morale is lousy. Anyway...*

LIBRE: What kinds of things were you reading? I'm sure it was...

BILLINGS: Letters, captured letters from home.

LIBRE: What was the general sentiment? Were there any stories or specific letters [inaudible]?

BILLINGS: Oh, I don't remember. I don't remember any specific thing. I just remember the tone. And most of them, these soldiers were homesick, but they were proud of fighting, they knew they were fighting for their country, some of them were very patriotic, and "if I die, please give my loved ones hugs and kisses" and that stuff. But you could see between the lines that a lot of them were terrified, scared. But, that was the only part that I was supposed to emphasize. You know, the patriotic stuff or "I'm okay. Don't worry about me," that kind of stuff was not the kind of stuff that the military wanted to hear.

LIBRE: Did your rebel streak continue there or were you getting...

BILLINGS: Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

LIBRE: Tell me about it.

BILLINGS: Well, at the end of the tour we were going to get commendation medals for our service, and we were going to get a plaque. And there was a big ceremony, a big party, and I'm the party pooper, and I said, "I don't want a plaque. I don't want any glorification of this war, so keep your plaque." And my colonel, Colonel Gillowin said, "Lieutenant, you're taking this plaque, whether you like it or not." And the funny thing is they misspelled "research." It was "reseach."
[laughter] I kept it for a while. I kept it for a while. Eventually I threw it away.

Then when I got back, I took the medals that I had earned and sent them to the Pentagon and said, "Take these and you can put them where the sun doesn't shine." And the letter came back empty with a rip in the corner. It said, "Return to sender." So, I don't know whether the pins in the medals punctured a hole in the manila folder, and they fell out accidentally, or they got it, they knew what it was because other people were doing it, and they said, "Just throw the medals away and send it back to him, return to sender. Make him think."

LIBRE: Yeah. And as your time at—the letters themselves, as you're reading them, how did you feel like this changed your

opinion? Did it like humanize the North Vietnamese? More so than they had been?

BILLINGS: Yeah, sure. Yeah, they were just like me. They were just like me. They were not some autonomous enemy, you know, without a family, without children, without a love life or any of that stuff. They were just like me. And I said, *I could be writing this letter if I was on the other side. And I'm writing letters similar to that on this side.* So, I mean, I didn't need much convincing, as you obviously know, but I realized that *these are human beings and they have a right to self-determination, and they weren't getting it.* We were interfering on this bogus domino theory which was based on a fallacious concept that there was a monolithic Communist threat, and there wasn't. There was a conflict between the Soviet Union and the Chinese, and the Vietnamese had a thousand year long history of resisting Chinese aggression. Many of their national heroes are heroes like, you know, our Washington, were against foreign aggression. In their case it was the Chinese. And the Cambodians are a totally different group of people. I went back to Cambodia because that was my area of specialty.

LIBRE: Talk to me about that.

BILLINGS: I went back a long time ago. A friend of mine who later became ambassador to Zambia in the State Department—he's my son's godfather and my wife's classmate at Harvard—but at this time he was a medium ranked State official. There was no embassy in Phnom Penh at the time, and there was just like an attaché—I'm not sure what they called them. But, there was just a few of us.

LIBRE: While you were in Vietnam?

BILLINGS: No, this was after Vietnam. This was after Vietnam I went to Phnom Penh, and it was a mess. It was a total mess. Well, this was after the Killing Fields. I went to Tuol Sleng, which was a high school at one time, turned out to be a torture chamber. And I went to Choeung Ek where they were all buried and had this stupa of just human skulls, just, oh, just awful. And you see the mass graves. Oh. I was there with the famous writer—I don't want to get the wrong name—from the *New York Times*, a famous writer from the *Washington Post*, and me. I was writing an article for the *Valley News*. And it was one of the funniest lines I ever

wrote, and I said, “Hi, I’m so-and-so from the *Washington Post*,” and “I’m so-and-so from the *New York Times*.” “Hank Billings from *Valley News*.” [laughter] And we all chuckled at that one. But, that was...

What we did when we invaded Cambodia, and we attacked a neutral country to interdict the Ho Chi Minh Trail and their supply lines, which toppled Norodom Sihanouk’s regime in the long run, and then led to that genocide where a third of the people were murdered. That’s a consequence. That’s an unforeseen consequence. But, as philosophers have always said, you know, “Beware of the unforeseen consequences.” You take an action, and you really have to look at what could possibly go wrong, because it probably will. And even if things that you don’t anticipate, and you couldn’t have anticipated the Killing Fields in 1965, but there it was. It was an unforeseen consequence.

LIBRE: Explain your work a little bit while you were working in Vietnam in intelligence for Cambodia. What kind of Cambodian intelligence were you doing and how did this...

BILLINGS: Well, I did—we’d get field reports, and what we were trying to prove was that the Viet Cong were using Cambodia to resupply. So, they were resupplying in a neutral country, and my job was to justify an American attack on a neutral country, because that’s where the enemy was. And the borderline between Cambodia and Vietnam was in dispute between the two countries. It was like the borderline between Mexico and Texas during the Mexican War. Is it the Rio Grande or is it the Nueces River? And that’s what the whole war was about was the southern boundary of Texas.

And they couldn’t agree here. So, are they really invading a foreign country or are they in a country that they consider their own to begin with? So it was mostly that kind of stuff. And I did stuff on Sihanouk, who was sort of a Hollywood playboy at the time. I mean, he made movies. Yeah, I mean, I’m not sure about the quality of the movies. But, he and his wife and... But they were in no position to stop the North Vietnamese, much more powerful people. And, so anyway, that was Cambodia. And there really wasn’t very much to talk about there.

It was more fun just going back and going to, you know, I was at the Angkor Wat. But I went down to—I went on a

caravan from Phnom Penh down to a village called Kep, on the Gulf of Thailand. And this Kep was like the French Riviera, because, of course, Cambodia was also a French possession. And all these beautiful villas all blown up, all destroyed, just the shells, just the walls left.

LIBRE: The US did or...

BILLINGS: No, no, the Khmer Rouge. Yeah, because that represented Western decadence. I mean, he killed people who wore glasses. So I'm dead. I mean, they killed people who could speak foreign languages. I mean, they killed people who danced. I mean, it was really... You want to talk about human depravity. That reign of terror in Cambodia, [makes a sound of dismay].

LIBRE: And did you see—I guess this is assuming you're an intelligence officer at the time, intelligence worker. Was this something you never would have foreseen or could see?

BILLINGS: I never would have foreseen that. I thought Cambodia might get dragged into the war. I thought we would bomb Cambodia, which we ended up doing. But on my B-52 strikes, you talk about the deceit of the government. I forgot the exact number of attacks. But, the numbers, when I added up the various provinces that were attacked and the total number of B-52 strikes, and individual planes would sortie, but then there's like a mission and there might be 18 planes or 27 planes or whatever. But I added up the number of strikes. We had a map and there was 15 year blah blah blah, and then the total number of strikes was off to the side. But I added up the numbers and it didn't come up the same. There was one or two strikes that were missing. It was like, let's say, 115, but I added up the number of strikes in South Vietnam and it was 113. I said, "Where are the other two strikes?" "We're not allowed to talk about that." Because they were in Laos, a neutral country. We were bombing a neutral country in 1965, '66, but they didn't even—this was a top secret document and they didn't even want that in the top secret document. Nobody was supposed to know that we'd actually bombed a neutral country in the first...

LIBRE: What was it like stumbling upon that?

BILLINGS: Oh, I was furious. I said, "This is not accurate." It was one of the reasons why I didn't want to say the "Effectiveness." I wanted to say "the Effects of B-52s." But I couldn't even talk about that. There were certain places even I would not go, and I'm not gonna—because I could have been court-martialed or whatever if I revealed the fact that we had bombed Laos when we were saying, "We respect the neutrality of Cambodia and Laos," which we didn't.

LIBRE: And how was that—did you feel like a new profound distrust in the US government and military at the time?

BILLINGS: Oh, yeah.

LIBRE: [inaudible]

BILLINGS: Well, I would go to other people's briefings, and you just knew that it was bullshit. They were just saying what they thought their superiors wanted to hear. So, if a major or a lieutenant is briefing a general on the status of the war, like the morale, or pacification, "Oh, this village is 78.4% pacified." What the hell does that mean, you know? So, I mean, but that they would skew the data, skew the body count, skew the pacification percentages, to show that we were winning, so that Johnson could go on television and say, "We're making real progress in South Vietnam. There's a light at the end of the tunnel." And that became a joke. *It's an oncoming train, you idiot.*

So I left Vietnam, very happy to get home, sent my medals back, got out of my uniform as fast as I could. But my parents were very proud of me. Yeah. I remember going to the racetrack with my dad, and they had harness racing at Suffolk Downs. This was way back when horse racing was a big deal. And the clubhouse, you had to have a coat and a shirt to get into the clubhouse. Now they don't even—the place is closed now. But it came so that you could come in in anything you wanted because they wanted the business. But, the guy said, "I'm sorry" to my father. "I'm sorry, but he can't come in because he's not properly dressed." And my father said, "Do you know he just got back from Vietnam?" and he just lit into this guy. And the guy said, "Okay, okay, we can loan him a coat. We'll loan him a coat. It's okay."
[laughter]

So my parents were proud. I didn't engage them in this. They were happy to get me back alive, because they had no idea. I mean, my mother almost had a heart attack when—this was before I went, because I was probably at Fort Holabird or Fort Bragg, she got a \$10,000 life insurance policy, which they all did, all the parents did. If your son dies in Vietnam, you get \$10,000. This is in Ken Burns' film, I don't remember if it was Moby or one of them said that—no, it was a black guy who said, "Well, if I die, my mother's gonna be rich. So it's a win-win for me. I mean, if I don't die, I come home a hero, and if I do die, my mother gets \$10,000," which was unheard of amount of money apparently in his circumstances. So...

LIBRE: And tell me about the rest of your family, their experience with the war and how they thought about you...

BILLINGS: Well, I had two older sisters who I don't ever remember talking to them about the war at all. My brother, who was five years younger, got into the National Guard, and I was happy for him. I says, "You don't have to go." But I knew that it was unfair that the people who got into the National Guard, like President [George W.] Bush, and people who used the college exemptions like President [Bill] Clinton, this was white privilege writ large, and it was not fair, because the people who went... There was a time...

Now, when I went there, now this is '65, '66, I had lots of Ivy League companions. We were called the "intellectual thoroughbreds." I don't know how I got into that, but Colonel Gillowin called us his intellectual thoroughbreds, because we had two guys—I mean, this was a small group. We were probably 12. Two of them went to Harvard, Nye Stevens and Nick Pile, and one of them went to Dartmouth, and one of them went to Columbia, and one of them had the master's degree from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton. We had a guy who had a Ph.D. from University of Texas. So, I was just a business graduate from U Mass, so I don't know how I got in there, but I did. And yeah, but if you go up to 1968, '69, when my brother got into the National Guard, nobody from Harvard was going to Vietnam. They all found a way out, and that was the way it was. I mean, it was not fair. So, if you look at the racial makeup of the forces, especially the combat forces, way disproportionately black and Hispanic, because, as Trump said, "What do you think, I'm stupid?" I mean, come on.

LIBRE: And going from that, you returned home. Well, I guess to start first, what was it like to leave? What was the experience of finishing up your tour?

BILLINGS: Well, obviously, I was happy. I kept a calendar, and I checked off each day, and some days I would go a half a check because I'm halfway through the day. [laughter] That's how bad it was. And the little plastic film where you keep in your wallet, it would have the imprint of my little checkmarks on each. And yeah, I was happy to get out, happy to be home. I went on to serve the rest of my tour as a 1st lieutenant at Fort Devens. And I actually extended. I extended for two months because I didn't have a summer job and my tour of duty was over in May. I was going to become a teacher, but I needed to work for the summer, so I extended it for, I don't know, three months maybe. And then I left. And I kept the uniform until a couple of years ago. One of the kids wore it for Halloween. Yeah. And then, there were anti-war demonstrations, and I would go to them.

LIBRE: What was your involvement?

BILLINGS: Well, I was never a speaker at these, but I would get involved individually with some. Because some people came back convinced that we were doing the right thing, and I would argue against it, and I would write editorials against it that would be published.

LIBRE: Were you able to speak about your experiences as an intelligence officer?

BILLINGS: No, no.

LIBRE: I mean, obviously, it was a top secret [inaudible]...

BILLINGS: No, no. I think if I had written the book that I did write and I had written it 30 years earlier, it would have probably been a bestseller. Because everybody had written memoirs by the time I ended up doing it in 2001. But if I had written it in, say, 1971, that would have been... Well, yeah, I think I probably would have been invited on a lot of talk shows, and "well, tell us the inside scoop on B-52s" or "tell us on Viet Cong morale." "Tell us what it was like living there." Because the war would still have been going on then. But I couldn't do that, because you weren't even allowed to keep a diary,

because if you'd get captured, that diary might provide valuable information to the enemy if they were going through that. So we couldn't. And then, because of the top secret nature of what we were doing, we couldn't say anything. So I could just speak in very broad generalities.

LIBRE: Sorry I interrupted you, I think. Explain your role in these anti-war protests, and how did it feel being someone who was just in Vietnam? [inaudible]

BILLINGS: Well, I was in a draft card burning march in Boston. I actually met my first wife on an anti-Vietnam march. It was at the Trinity Church in Boston. I think that's what it is. And William Sloane Coffin was speaking and there were some others, very famous anti-war people speaking. It was a big march around the Commons and into the church. And kids would come up and burn their draft cards. Of course, I didn't have a draft card because I'd already served. But, the interesting thing was, people would yell at you from the curb: "You Commie bastard. You coward. You blah blah blah." *What do you know about me?* [laughter]

LIBRE: What was your feeling there?

BILLINGS: I just had to chuckle because they knew nothing about me, and I had served and I had been back for a year or two from Vietnam. But they assumed that I had not served or was a coward or a draft dodger or burning my draft card or whatever.

LIBRE: Did you ever find yourself fed up where you yelled back?

BILLINGS: No. No, I never. I just chuckled because I knew what was going on. There was no point in taking on. And sometimes it's like that. Why do you engage with people you're not going to change, you're not going to persuade? You just yell at each other. That's a hard thing to resist, though, now. Very hard to resist.

LIBRE: Did you feel that the tide was turning, having come back, and then all of a sudden more and more people were on your side?

BILLINGS: Oh, absolutely, absolutely, yes. When I was at graduate school at U Mass, there were protests there and I was there when they had the Kent State killings, and they were going

to cancel all the classes at U Mass. And I was teaching in education. I was teaching a course on the foundations of education. I was a doctoral student at the time. And I said, "I'm gonna have my class, but I'm not talking about educational foundations. I'm gonna talk about Vietnam." And I had a packed class. They all came. And I talked for an hour-and-a-half about my experiences in Vietnam. But that was during the Kent State, at that time. Oh, you could see the tide had turned by '72, really turned. Well, it really turned in some significant ways in '68, after the Tet Offensive. People saying, "Well, if we're winning and we're killing them at a rate of 10 to 1," which was some God-awful... As they mentioned in the Ken Burns movie again, Americans weren't concerned about the 10. They were concerned about the one, the one American that's dying. They don't care about the 10 Viet Cong.

LIBRE: Certainly that's what you see.

BILLINGS: Right. I mean, 60,000 guys died. And I'll give you one story that... One of the jobs that I would have would be officer of the guard. And I only had it once.

LIBRE: What was this job?

BILLINGS: This is, there was a compound outside of Saigon that had high walls, and it was where people came to be assigned to be transferred. When we first got there, we were in tents. This was a compound. And my sergeant, George Bertzel, who was with the 519th and my battalion, was the sergeant of the guard two nights before I became the officer of the guard. You're only officer for one night. And there was a guy that came back from the Delta who wanted to go out, but there were Buddhist demonstrations and there was a curfew, and he was not allowed to go anywhere because he wanted to go out at like 11:30. And this was like 25 minutes outside of Saigon, so it was a significant ride. And Sergeant Bertzel said, "You can't go. You've got to stay in the barracks." And he was a little drunk, the guy. So he went back and talked to the officer of the guard, and the officer of the guard said, "You can't go." So he grabbed his M-14 and says, "I'm going." And when Bertzel said, "You can't go," he killed him. He shot him dead.

So, I was the officer that got two nights later, and there was no alcohol. And these guys were all pissed, because they

were restrained and they were... And anyway, I was on tender hooks because I'm the officer, I'm the one person in charge of these two hundred and some odd guys. And there was a scuffle in the barracks, and it was a black on white scuffle. And I had to break it up. And that was about as close to real danger as I faced, because it was really quite angry. I'm 6'3" and I was pretty fit in those days, and I had to grab the white guy and just threaten to basically, you know, punch his, knock his lights out, do something. I was really angry. I said, "Not on my watch." Because somebody had spilled something, thrown up, and that had caused the big thing: "You clean that stuff up." And then I walked back and I got outside and I go, *Holy mackerel! Can the sun come up please? I've gotta get out of here.*

LIBRE: Sergeant Bertzel, was he—were you two close?

BILLINGS: Yes, yes, very close. We have a bet, too. We bet on baseball. He was a big Chicago Cubs fan, even though he lived in San Francisco. Oh, by the way, the paper, the obituary in the *San Francisco Chronicle* with Sergeant Bertzel's death said, "Died not due to enemy action. Not due to hostile action." What the hell's that imply? That he died of venereal disease? I mean, what does that mean? I would say that was pretty damned hostile, being shot, even though it was by an American.

LIBRE: Wow. And did you feel at the time that that was sort of part of the agenda that the government wanted portrayed [inaudible]

BILLINGS: Right, right. The idea that an American killed an American in Vietnam would have been incomprehensible. That would be something you'd never want to let get out. Now, fragging later on, but that was later on. Because when I was in Vietnam, it was like, we were very pure. I mean, you see these movies of the guys smoking marijuana on the barrel of a gun. That was '68, '69. I was there in '65, '66. The word "marijuana" never crossed my lips, never. Drugs, never. The closest I could come to anything that would remotely resemble that kind of misbehavior, I mean, actionable misbehavior, was exchanging money, taking money that was...

When you go to Vietnam, you couldn't have greenbacks. You couldn't have American money. You had to get military

payment certificates, MPCs. So you had to turn in all your greenbacks, right? And you got military payment certificates, which you could then change into Vietnamese currency, piasters. And there was an exchange rate, an official exchange rate. And the Vietnamese might give you a little bit more in their money for the MPCs, but every once in a while they would just withdraw all the MPCs and come up with a totally new issue, because they didn't want these in the hands of the Vietnamese. But, greenbacks, real money, now, that would get three or four times the going rate.

So, one day I open up a letter from my mother, who doesn't know this. Sends me a \$20 bill in the mail, you know, "have fun." So, I just said, "I don't want this \$20 bill. [laughter] What the hell are you giving me this money?" So, I'm in the Majestic Hotel and I'm in an elevator. And the guy must have said, "This guy's got greenbacks on him. Look at him." [laughter] I don't know what I had, a dollar sign on my face or whatever. But he stops the elevator between floors and says, "Do you have any greenbacks? Do you have any American currency?" I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, I'll give you five times the going exchange rate in piasters." And I definitely wanted to get rid of this \$20 bill. So I gave it to him. And he gave me back five times what that was worth in MPCs.

So I'm walking home after this, relieved, and I'm saying, "Holy mackerel. I could have my mother send me greenbacks," because they didn't open the mail. "I could take the greenbacks, get five times what they're worth in piasters, turn the piasters back into MPCs, write my mother a check for five times the amount," because I could write a check, I could send money home. I could send money out of the country. I could have made easily, because of my access in Saigon—you couldn't do this out in the field, but in an urban setting like Saigon, I could have easily, if I wasn't greedy, converted \$20,000, \$30,000 into \$125,000 from the \$30,000. Easily. I might have gotten caught. But, if you're smart about it, you wouldn't get caught. But, I never did that.

LIBRE: Well, yeah, why?

BILLINGS: Why? Because I told myself, and it was probably true, that the money that this guy was using would be using money to buy weapons to kill my friends. So I didn't do it. But it would have been easy to do. And I did it once, only because I just

wanted to get rid of the \$20 bill. But I'm saying to myself, *Wow, that is...* And I think one guy did it and got caught, an Air Force guy, I recall reading way back a long time ago. So...

LIBRE: Was there inflation in the process, is that why?

BILLINGS: Oh, yeah, yeah.

LIBRE: Because they wanted a steady amount?

BILLINGS: Yeah, that was hard currency. Everything else was fluid. I mean, that Saigon tea is fini, the stiff, that was because of inflation, because the girls kept charging more and more, because that was how—you bought them Saigon tea instead of a champagne cocktail or whatever. And it's just cold tea. It was just tea. But that was Saigon tea.

LIBRE: And explain to me, when you came back, how did your experiences in Vietnam and your anti-war protests coming out, how did that inform, or how has it informed the rest of your career as a history teacher, or as a writer?

BILLINGS: Well, that's a good question. I became very skeptical of authority. I always wanted to dig deeper, and I always, especially after what happened in Cambodia, tried to look at several levels below the surface. I always think of—I describe it as *yes, but... on the other hand...* I try to think that way all the time. It's like a corkscrew: *Yes, but on the other hand, there's this angle. But on the other hand...* It goes back and forth. And that kind of self reflection, skepticism, wanting to dig deeper, yeah, I think it had an effect on me certainly as a teacher and as a writer.

LIBRE: Would you do it again?

BILLINGS: Would I do what?

LIBRE: Serve. Would you serve...

BILLINGS: Well, I would be a totally different person if I hadn't gone through that experience. So I probably would. I probably would. I would not wreck my colonel's Jeep, however, which I did.

LIBRE: Oh, there's got to be a story there.

BILLINGS: Oh, there's a great story there. [laughter] Oh, by this—and halfway through the war, halfway through my term, I thought of going on R&R and was not coming back, going to Malaysia. I always thought of Malaysia as a great place, multicultural, multi-religion, you had Buddhists, you had Muslims, you had Christians, you had me. [laughter] It would have been very interesting. But, we had a few Jeeps, and I borrowed Major Strongrinis' Jeep. And I was interviewing—I was going down to interview or get interview reports from captured enemy soldiers, because I was doing the morale thing. But I was very loose in terms of security.

So, I'm driving the major's Jeep out of Tan Son Nhat, and I had all these interrogation reports in a manila folder sitting in the passenger seat, instead of locking it up and in a briefcase and chained and all. And I'm driving along and all of a sudden the manila folder blows up in the air and all these secret documents are starting to blow, and I thought, *Oh, my God!* [makes a crashing noise] Right through a sign that said, "Drive carefully per order of the base commander." [laughter] Smashed the Jeep, totaled the Jeep. And in Saigon they had these French telephone poles. So I'm driving down this street, but the poles are not dug in the ground independently suspended. They're sort of loose hanging. I don't know how the hell they do it, but it's just on the surface. And all the poles along here just [makes a sound of poles falling] falling down on little push carts and all the people's faces are... Jesus, what a mess, what a mess. Anyway, because oh, that's what it was. I drove through the sign that said "Drive carefully per order of the base commander." Then there was a concrete block which helped to support the poles, and there was a cable that went up to the top of the pole. I snapped the cable, so that's why all the poles fell down.

And, so the Jeep was totaled. And I figured *I'm going to have to buy a new Jeep for the Army*. Oh, it doesn't work out that way, it turns out. And when I went back, I said, "Colonel, I wrecked..." I said, "Major..." – no, that's what it was – it was the colonel's Jeep. I got that screwed up. I said, "Colonel, I wrecked your Jeep. Here's your keys." He said, "You didn't wreck my... Major Strongrinis, can I have your keys? You didn't wreck my Jeep. You wrecked his Jeep." [laughter] So I got my license suspended and I wasn't allowed to drive the rest of my tour in Vietnam. But it turned out that I didn't have

to buy a new Jeep. They said I was charged, if the Jeep could have been fixed, it would have cost \$777.77, and that's what they'd dock my pay over the next six months, if it could have been fixed. But it couldn't be. So... But, it's a funny story because you don't drive through a sign that says "Drive carefully."

LIBRE: That's probably not the best.

BILLINGS: But, I mean, I had these documents and they were blowing all over the airport, so I took my eye off the road. So, I was a screwup, basically. I was not somebody that... I've never told that to my family. Yeah, bad enough screwup.

LIBRE: Do you ever think back to when you delayed your initial—in '64 when you delayed initially going and joining and doing your time for the Army? Do you ever think back what might have been or what could have happened had you joined early enough that you would have gone to Germany?

BILLINGS: Yeah, I don't know what would have happened. I would have enjoyed that. I would have enjoyed being in Germany. I had been in Germany on my hitchhiking tour through Europe. I would have put in my time. I don't know whether I would have been in intelligence or still in armor at that point. Maybe I would have done some field exercises pretending I'm fighting the Russians. I don't know how that would have worked out. I really didn't give it much thought because that was not what was happening to me.

LIBRE: From Vietnam, I think you mentioned somewhere that you tried to go back, didn't you?

BILLINGS: I did. Oh, well, yeah. Yeah, I went back when I went to Cambodia. We flew in and we got deported, because we didn't have the right papers. So I flew back to Tan Son Nhat. I flew into Tan Son Nhat on an airplane called Air Campuchia. Now, that's got to be a scary airplane. Those are Russian planes that the Russians no longer thought were safe. So we flew from Phnom Penh to Saigon. And I was with a State Department official. I thought Mark knew what he was doing, but apparently he didn't get the right papers. So, we were held in confinement at the airport and deported. And then we came back four or five days later with the proper papers, and we stayed. So I went back. And then

I went on the bike trip in 2001. Went to Hanoi and we biked down to Saigon.

LIBRE: Tell me about that experience coming back. What was the country of Vietnam...

BILLINGS: Oh, it was a totally different country, totally different country. This was 25 years after the war was over, 26 years, and very different. Although, you go to North Vietnam and you can still see the air raid shelters and the pith helmets on some of the old soldiers. I remember going into this North Vietnamese veteran—going into his house as a member of our tour group. I was the only veteran on the tour. And it was a biking group, Ballo Asia. And went in, and this guy was so proud—and this is a dark little hovel. I mean, it couldn't have been an apartment more than six or seven hundred square feet. But he had this picture of him at a rally with Ho Chi Minh. He said, "That's me over here," and he was a tiny little dot in this huge crowd, and there's Ho Chi Minh giving a speech, and he was as proud as he could be.

And I went to Ho Chi Minh's house. He lived very simple. He's got this huge palace, and he lived in a simple house. The people loved him because he was one of them. He was very well educated, of course. He spoke French and he traveled all over Europe, and he worked in the United States even. But he wore, you know, the same kind of sandals the ordinary people, the same kind of clothes. He didn't dress like a Chinese Mandarin. He stayed Vietnamese. Anyway...

Yeah, when I got to Hua in northern South Vietnam where they had that massive slaughter of South Vietnamese who allegedly supported the Americans. I mean, they put them down by the river and shot like 5,000 of them. I would go to a bar or go out to eat at a diner, and somebody would find out I was a veteran, a Vietnamese person, and he'd say, "Oh, do you know Captain so-and-so? He promised to get me out of here." You know, you'd run into that kind of stuff. And you'd pass all these mass graves, the Viet Cong graves, the North Vietnamese graves.

Then you go to Da Nang and you go up into the caves and you can look down on the beaches, on China Beach, and you say, *Well, the Viet Cong controlled this. No wonder they were able to knock out planes on that air base.* I mean, perfect location. And, you know, it was very different. I mean,

you'd go to a bar down in Saigon, when we finally got to Saigon, you'd go to the *Apocalypse Now* bar, where the big helicopter fan [makes fan noise]. So, it's very, very, very different, very peaceful. And when people found out that you were a veteran, they want to talk to you. There's no... I detected zero animosity to me as somebody who had been there. They knew nothing about my role. I wasn't in combat. I didn't kill their great-uncle or anything like that. But I got a picture when I was sailing in Ha Long Bay in North Vietnam. I was with a guy whose father was a major, a big wig in the North Vietnamese Army. He was our tour guide. And there's a picture of me with my arms around him, you know, on Ha Long Bay.

LIBRE: How did that make you feel?

BILLINGS: I felt great. I felt great. You know, the war's over. He's not my enemy. Never was. So, he's just a nice guy. So, that was great. I'd go back again.

LIBRE: How did you...

BILLINGS: Ed's gonna pay for it, though. Ed's gonna pay for it.
[laughter]

LIBRE: [laughter] How was it—one last thing here—but when you went to a memorial in Vietnam after coming back, how did you feel that the war was remembered in these memorials and museums in Vietnam versus, say, I don't know, have you been to the Vietnam War Memorial in DC?

BILLINGS: Yes. Well, yeah. But the more important one was the one in Saigon. It's the war crimes museum [War Remnants Museum].

LIBRE: To compare, how do those both feel next to each other? Not that they need to be compared. How did the experience...

BILLINGS: Well, the one in Saigon was nerve wracking. It was very humbling. I felt miserable after coming out of that, and you see some of the photographs. Miserable. I mean, when they talked about... Ah, yeah, tearing people apart, basically, with two tanks going in different directions. And throwing people out of helicopters to get somebody else in the helicopter to talk. I mean, a lot of that is apocryphal, but some of it's real. And ah, yeah, no, I'm not... And the one in DC, I mean, I

would approach that pretty much... because I went there much later. Take it in as... The wall affects me much more than any museum, just seeing the names. I'd take all my children down to the wall, and I'd find George Bertzel's name.

LIBRE: You found him?

BILLINGS: Yeah. I got a picture at home of pointing out his name, and my daughter's standing next to me. So... How are we doing, Matt?

LIBRE: I think this has been great so far. I can pause this actually really quick.

[End of interview.]