John A. Calhoun ’66
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
October 11, 2016
Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

[EMILY J.] SMID: This is Emily Smid. I am at Rauner [Special Collections] Library at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Today is the 11th of October, 2016, and I am interviewing John [A.] Calhoun, who is in Portland, Oregon. This interview is for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project.

Thank you again, John, for talking to me today. And to begin, I wondered if you could just tell me a little bit about your childhood, where you were born, what you liked to do as a kid.

CALHOUN: Sure. I grew up in Rochester, New York, and went to Irondequoit High School. And as a kid, I did a lot of hiking and outdoor activity with my family. My parents were both from Calgary, Alberta [Canada], and my grandfather on my father’s side was a charter member of the Alpine Club of Canada, and so when we went out to visit them, we’d go hiking in the—in the Rockies [Rocky Mountains]. But I did a lot of that.

Went to summer camp, learned to canoe. And spent summers, most summers in Canada, either on the lakes near Mississauga [Ontario, Canada], Algonquin [Provincial] Park or with my grandparents in western Canada.

SMID: Okay. What was your relationship like with your parents? Were you close to them?

CALHOUN: I’m—I wouldn’t say I was super close. I had generally a good relationship. By the time I got to high school, I was pushing for independence. I was excited about leaving Rochester and going to Dartmouth and—and getting away. Again, during—since I graduated from high school in ’62, I was part of the generation that was rebelling against the “white shirt and tie” atmosphere that was current with my parents’ generation.

My father worked for Eastman Kodak [Company] his entire career. The father spending my whole life working for one company kind of appalled me, and so, you know, I was pushing for more independence at that point in time, But, you know, my parents were good parents, and they were generally supportive, so—

SMID: Did you—were you invested in your academics in high school? Is that kind of what—what led you to thinking about Dartmouth? Or can you talk just a little bit about how you chose to end up at Dartmouth and what the transition was like from high school?

CALHOUN: Sure. I was, you know, kind of nerd in school. I wasn't particularly socially active. I had a good group of neighborhood friends, and I was on the swim team, but I was not—did not have strong rapport with the jock crowd. I, you know, was an honor student and was focused on, you know, my academics, getting good grades and an intellectual life.

When I looked at colleges, there were three schools that I ended up applying to: Dartmouth, Williams [College] and Middlebury [College]. There are similarities to all three. I was trying to decide between Dartmouth and Williams ultimately and selected Dartmouth because it was slightly bigger and had a bigger academic catalog, more options.

I was intrigued at the time about the 3-2 program with Tuck [School of Business] because I wanted to go into business eventually and go to business school. And, you know, I ultimately didn't do that, but that was one of the things that attracted me over Williams.

And then just the size of the school, about 1,200 versus 3,000. I didn't want to go to a big university, but having a few more class options, and a thicker catalog appealed to me.

SMID: So you—what did you study when you were here? Did you do the 3-2 program?

CALHOUN: No. I didn't go down that road. I started out as a chemistry major, and it wasn't that I wanted to become a chemist but because, as I said, I always wanted to go into business, but I

thought having a technical background would be useful to me, given the nature of industry and that, you know, my father was a chemist, so I had some familiarity with it.

At the—by the spring of my junior year, I had gotten less and less interested in chemistry, and I had looked at the classes I had taken up to that point and found out I had actually taken more political science or government courses than chemistry courses. I said, *What the hell am I doing?* And I switched over to government, and I ended up graduating as a government major.

SMID: Okay.

So you mentioned earlier that in high school you kind of felt a little bit like you were rebelling against the sort of white shirt, corporate, nine-to-five job type of lifestyle that your parents led, and I wonder if you felt like your peers at Dartmouth felt similarly and if you kind of—if you kept those feelings up during your—your undergraduate career.

CALHOUN: Again, Dartmouth, as all schools of the sixties, was going through change. I was—partly because I went through ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps] there, I was, again, kind of on the isolated side because most students weren't doing that, and there was a lot of ridicule of those who were doing it. But the biggest issue for me at Dartmouth was the prep school crowd versus the public school. And the people of—the kids who came from privilege versus my very middle-class background.

SMID: So I want to—I want to talk a little bit about ROTC. First, I want to know what—what made you decide to go into it. I know in your essay you mentioned that you had a brother who deserted the [U.S.] Army, and you were also kind of fearful of the draft, and you wanted to—if you were going to have to be in the Army, you wanted to do it as an officer, but can you tell me a little—a little bit about your decision to go into that? Yeah.

CALHOUN: Sure. At the time, I actually was surprised that more people didn't go through ROTC because the draft was the prevalent thing, and it's hard to imagine today, but in the fifties and sixties, the draft was ever present. And while it wasn't

guaranteed you would get drafted, there was a pretty high likelihood you could. And I did not want to enter the military as a—as a private, and so, you know, that was a pretty easy decision on my part. Now, I know some people even started it and then dropped out because they, you know, thought about doing other things, but I was always conscious of that possibility. And, you know, frankly, as the war heated up, it became more likely.

SMID: Mm-hm. You mentioned that you—there was kind of a—a bit of backlash to students who did choose to participate in ROTC, and did you feel that directly? Did you have anybody who—who was not ROTC try to dissuade you from doing—doing it?

CALHOUN: No, it wasn't a dissuasion, it was the—I mean, there was a combination of a nascent antiwar—now, remember, the—the real antiwar activity really didn't get going until '67, '68, after I graduated from Dartmouth. But there was a small group of antiwar people. But the rest of it was just the kind of juvenile mocking of people doing something that wasn't considered cool. Again, it's—it's a little hard for people to—today to understand that perspective because their view of people going through ROTC and the military is quite different. But it was—it was kind of a harassment, an easy target, to—to mock a group of people doing something that, you know, like I said, just basically wasn't considered a cool thing to be doing.

SMID: Can you—can you mention briefly your brother and how his experience motivated you as well?

CALHOUN: Well, my brother had always been a somewhat uncomfortable person socially, so—I'm trying to think of the right word. What's the—the term for somebody who's a social isolate today?

SMID: You could say, like, a recluse, a hermit or, I don't know, kind of—

CALHOUN: Oh, no, the medical. [Transcriber's note: autistic]

SMID: Oh. I'm not sure, but you can call him—yeah, just whatever you want.

CALHOUN: Maybe it'll pop in. Anyways, he basically had trouble relating with other people, and—

SMID: It was like an antisocial personality maybe.

CALHOUN: It's not antisocial. That's—that's a slightly different term. This is an inability to understand other people's feelings and reactions. Anyway, so he spent six months or one semester at college, then dropped out, and then was on ski patrol at Mad River Glen [a ski area in Fayston, Vermont] for a season, was an ambulance driver and basically was not clear where he was headed.

He decided to join the Army I think just because of this draft issue and get it over with. It was fairly common at the time for people who didn't know what they were - wanted to do to enter the military, and it was considered useful for discipline, you know, and getting a start on life. But he didn't last very long.

And he had a bad skin disease and ended up in some southern Army camp, where it was hot and humid, and he to wear a wool uniform and became—his skin became irritated. He was constantly itching, and, of course, he couldn't really explain things, and the sergeants there didn't—weren't willing to listen to his concerns, and he just broke and disappeared.

And he drifted for a year before he was eventually found—I mean, he was a deserter. There's—there's some kind of listing that the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] for deserters, and eventually was found and taken back in and went through a discharge—got a dishonorable discharge. So that was all the time I was a senior in high school and a freshman at Dartmouth.

SMID: Okay. So you kind of—how—what was your reaction to that? I'm sure—it sounds like you probably weren't in contact with him, but were you—did you feel disappointed, or did it just motivate you?

CALHOUN: Yeah, I would say that it was a—kind of an embarrassment. You know, in hindsight I'm more sympathetic to what he

went through, but at the time, it was, *Jesus, he can't do anything*. And, you know, he hurt—hurt my parents because they weren't in touch—I mean, he literally disappeared for a year. Nobody knew where he was.

And, you know, I was a pretty patriotic kid, who wanted to do the right thing, and the—you know, the culture of the time—and, again, this was before the war really got going. Participating in the military was, you know, a citizen's duty, and, you know, even as a history major you know that in all the wars, it becomes a national investment, whether it's the Civil War, the American Revolution. And, you know, we had just gotten through World War II and the Korean War. Those were very close in that time period.

It's—it's kind of funny. At this point, it's—I've been out of the military for forty-five years. When I was at Dartmouth and starting out in ROTC, it was—forty-five to sixty—you know, less then twenty years since World War II had ended, let alone the Korean War. So it was—it was a different kind of environment.

SMID: Mm-hm.

So your time at Dartmouth was—I mean, there was so much going on not only in Vietnam but in the States as well. I wonder if you remember at all what it was like here, in Hanover, when you heard, for example, about JFK's [President John F. Kennedy's] being assassinated and if you could talk a little bit about that.

CALHOUN: Sure. I mean, there is nobody who was conscious at that time who doesn't remember exactly where they were when they heard the news. I was in chemistry lab, and the—the professor came in and announced it, and, you know, we all left. And I was a member of *The Dartmouth* at the time, on the business side, but I went over there, and we started putting out, you know, a special edition, you know. And the whole school did nothing for three days except follow the news.

SMID: Yeah. Wow.

So in addition to that, there was a lot of burgeoning things happening in Vietnam. You being a member of ROTC and kind of recognizing that you would somehow have to be involved in what was happening there, how did you react to, for example, the Gulf of Tonkin [incident], your feeling about that sort of thing?

CALHOUN: Yeah, the Gulf of Tonkin was—you know, let me reset. That was the spring of—or the—

SMID: Sixty-four.

CALHOUN: Sixty-four or ’65?

SMID: Sixty-four.

CALHOUN: Four. That’s right. That wasn’t seen as—when it immediately happened, wasn’t seen as a huge deal. It’s—I’m trying to think of a current example. I mean, we have things all the time today where some—some—there’s some attack, whether it’s a civilian attack or an attack—like, when the ship got blown up in Yemen. I can’t remember the name of it and so on. But, you know, nobody assumed from that attack that we were about to go to war. So it—I don’t remember it as a huge deal.

Now, at the time, in—in ’64, that summer, I was working at a resort in Glacier [National] Park, and, you know, there are no TVs around. We could listen to the radio, but, you know, you don’t get a lot of in-depth coverage on the radio at that time because mostly you’re listening to rock ’n’ roll stations. So it wasn't something that I—was really visible until later, when [President Lyndon B.] Johnson started ordering troops in.

And up to that point in time, it was, you know, Special Ops [Special Operations] operation. And Kennedy had created the Special Forces, and it was a kind of glamorous kind of thing. But there was no massive troops there until the Gulf of Tonkin and until, you know,—I don’t know how long it took, but a couple of months before we started putting in major troop operations. But even then, it wasn’t—there wasn’t a lot of immediate contact, so it took time to build.

SMID: Right. So you—when—when they did start—when Johnson did start sending troops to Vietnam, you didn't feel any apprehension? You didn't think, *Oh, that might be me soon*?

CALHOUN: Oh, no, no, I did. I mean, once they started sending a lot of troops, it was clear to me (1) that it was possible I would end up there and (2) it just reconfirmed my decision that being in ROTC and being an officer was a better thing.

SMID: Mm-hm. So in addition to—and doing ROTC—I am going to backtrack a little bit. Can you—you mentioned that you wrote for *The Dartmouth*, but can—

CALHOUN: I didn't write. I was on the business—business side.

SMID: I'm sorry. Okay, business.

CALHOUN: But I was around when—even on the business side, I'd take a turn occasionally being a night editor to put the paper out, so I was involved with,—you know, friends with all the other people who were actually doing the writing.

SMID: Mm-hm. Did you do anything else on campus?

CALHOUN: Not a—not a lot. I mean, I did intramural sports, and I'm a skier, so I did skiing when I could. But the two primary activities were *The Dartmouth* and the ROTC.

SMID: Okay. Okay, so we can—we can come back to where we were. So I'm interested in hearing about your decision to go to Stanford Business School [sic; Stanford Graduate School of Business] what the transition there was like from Dartmouth.

CALHOUN: Can you be a little more specific?

SMID: Well, I guess—I don't—just how did you decide to end up there, and what was your focus when you went to school, and—yeah.

CALHOUN: Okay. So, you know, as I had said, I always wanted to go to business school. I was—after, you know, my junior year, I was a little tired of being in New England, so the idea of staying there for five years, through the Tuck program, didn't

appeal to me. So I looked at the other business schools. I had no interest in Harvard [Business School], and I kind of looked at Wharton [School of the University of Pennsylvania] some. But I—I fundamentally wanted to get away from the East Coast. Again, this was part of the—the formal culture of the East Coast, the prep school stuff, and so I—I was more focused on the West.

Stanford at the time was considered one of the top three business schools. As I said, I was kind of tired of the weather in New England and thought that between that and getting to a more western, laid-back culture had some appeal. And so Stanford was actually the only school I applied to. And I figured if I didn't get in, I'd just go do my two years in the Army. I did get in, and I postponed it, so that's what I did.

SMID: So did your classmates at Stanford Business School know that you were going—going into the Army? And if so, what did they think about that?

CALHOUN: They did. Their—I mean, there wasn't an awful lot of discussion about it. Everybody was, you know, basically, trying to figure out what they would do next and, for the bulk of them, how they would avoid getting drafted. So, you know, some of them went into the Peace Corps. Some of them got appointments in—you know, at the Pentagon or for military contractors. One of them was Lloyd [M.] Bentsen [III], who is the son of the vice presidential candidate, Senator [Lloyd M.] Bentsen [Jr.]. And he got in the Air [National] Guard, along with [later President] George [W.] Bush. Served in the same unit.

SMID: Wow.

CALHOUN: There was a lot of that. There were a handful of us who had been through ROTC and were headed into the military, so I wasn't the only one, but it was a minority. You know, this was a class of I want to say 230 young males. There were, like, I think, three women involved—in the class, and only one or two of them graduated. So it was basically, you know, an all-male group. There were a handful of military veterans, so people who had spent—done a tour of the military prior to coming to the business school. But, again, that was a small group.

SMID: Was there a sort of sense of camaraderie within that group, or—of people who—in the group of people in your class who were going into the service or had already served?

CALHOUN: Nope. I mean, I assume that a couple of people who had served, you know, had done some socializing just simply because they had a shared experience, but there was no military camaraderie.

SMID: So were you still pretty—was it on your mind when you were going to business school? Were you thinking about your two years that you would have to serve? And if so, were you kind of getting less excited about it as time went on, if you were ever excited about it, or kind of feeling as though you—you didn't want to go as much as you maybe once had?

CALHOUN: Well, it was generally in the background, and I was pretty sensitive about it. I mean, I was assuming that I'd end up there. In '68, during the Tet Offensive, it was a very in-your-face battle all the time, and at that time, I was, you know, three or four months from graduating, and knowing that I would then go in, so [chuckles] it—it really did hit me at that point.

In fact, I remember talking to a professor where I had a big project to write and saying that it was a little hard for me to concentrate on doing this paper, given that, you know, I'd be entering the military upon graduation and be expected to end up in Vietnam. So it—it did impact me at that point.

SMID: Was your professor sympathetic? [Chuckles.]

CALHOUN: [Chuckles.] Somewhat, but it didn't help much.

SMID: They often aren't, yes. [Chuckles.]

Okay, so—I'm sorry.

CALHOUN: Yeah, no, I—you know, "Okay, I understand. You gotta—still gotta do it anyway."

SMID: [Chuckles.] Better be in by the due date, right?

CALHOUN: Yeah, yeah.

SMID: Okay, so you graduate from Stanford Business School, and your next stop was Fort Still [sic; Fort Sill, Oklahoma], right?

CALHOUN: Yeah, but in between, I went to Europe that summer. So '68 was a really meaningful year. So let's go back a little bit.

SMID: Okay.

CALHOUN: So in the fall of '67, [the Rev. Dr.] Martin Luther King [Jr.] came to campus, and he gave a lecture that filled—what's the auditorium that is next to the—you know, the business school where I was, as opposed to the new one?

SMID: The auditorium at Dartmouth? Or at Stanford?

CALHOUN: Oh, you don't know, I'm sorry. [Both chuckle.] No. Okay, so there was a big auditorium on the Stanford campus, so I attended the lecture, or speech or whatever. And as I was walking away from it, King was trying to find his car, and he—he—he walked, you know—I was kind of standing there in the middle of this field, and he's coming right at me, looking around, trying to remember where the car is parked or whoever he's trying to meet. So I'm face to face with Martin Luther King.

Well, in February he gets assassinated. In June I'm at a bachelor party, and the night of the primary election, California primary election, and I'm more interested in the election because I'm interested in politics and government than I am with the party, so I'm in a room with a couple of people watching the results come in when [Robert F.] "Bobby" Kennedy is assassinated. So that's two of the events.

Then I go to Europe, and I'm hitchhiking around Europe. I end up in Czechoslovakia [now the Czech Republic] and spend a week there with a girl that'd met on the train from Vienna [Austria] into Prague and got myself invited to stay with her family and so on. And in Prague, this was the Prague Spring. I don't know if you know what that was. Have you studied that at all?

SMID: No, I haven't.

CALHOUN: So this was a liberal—it's kind of like the Arab Spring.

SMID: Arab Spring, okay.

CALHOUN: Well, it was like the Arab Spring, back in '68. And in downtown—or—yeah, downtown Prague, there was a space for—people would give speeches, and—it was public space. And everybody who—all the tourists and the young people would go there, and they would have translators in the crowd, translating the speeches. And, again, this was in a communist country, and it was kind of the breakdown of the totalitarian state, you know, twenty years before it really happened in Europe, the rest of Europe, so it's a very exciting time—you know, a moment in history.

And I was talking to a guy on a train. And, again, I'm using broken German, some French and English to communicate with people, so—and I'm only fluent in English. But I'm able to communicate. And this older man—I was talking about how excited I was as to what's happening. He said, "Well, the Russians won't allow it." I asked him, "What do you mean?" "They'll all come in and stop it." I said, "Oh, no, this is so great. It's—you know, nobody would do that." Well, I left there, and two weeks later, the Russians marched in. And that was the end of that. And I say "marched in," with tanks and—

SMID: Yeah.

CALHOUN: And so that was number three.

And number four, in September then I entered the Army and went to Fort Sill.

SMID: Wow, an eventful transition, then.

CALHOUN: Yes.

SMID: I'm—I'm curious—

CALHOUN: Oh, no, no, of course. Oh, one more:

SMID: Oh, okay.

CALHOUN: I came back from Europe and spent two weeks with my family up in Canada at the time of the [1968] Democratic [National] Convention in Chicago [Illinois] and watched on TV the riots in the streets and the turmoil in the convention, where the—Mayor [Richard J.] Daley was screaming at the Democratic leaders because some of them were sympathizing with the street demonstrators, and he was trying to put down the demonstrations with marshal force.

So that was—it was a very chaotic time. I'm trying to think if there's one more thing on the civil rights era. I don't think so. But anyway, so then I entered Fort Sill. Okay.

SMID: I'm curious, though. Did you—did you talk to Martin Luther King? Did you guys—did you have a conversation?

CALHOUN: No.

SMID: No. Just saw him

CALHOUN: Yeah, I just—it's like, you know, when I was listening to the—to the speech, I was, you know, high up in the balcony, way, way, and then when he came out and I ran into him, I was, like, face to face.

SMID: That's amazing.

CALHOUN: I was not at the point then that I was comfortable going up and shaking his hand, which today I would do.

SMID: So coming off of that pretty exciting transition, you are now going to Fort Still [sic]. Can you—can you talk about your transition there—what it was like arriving, how you felt?

CALHOUN: It was—it wasn't a big shock. I mean, I had—when you go through ROTC you go to summer camp, where you get the equivalent of basic training, and that's where it's kind of a brutal deal. Officer training, they treated you as an officer. You went to class, and when you were out in the field, you were still an officer, not a recruit, so it was—you know, and you're surrounded by peers. Everybody—everybody else—I had another Dartmouth classmate who was in the same Fort

Sill class, and so, you know, I had a friend there from the beginning, and so it—it was kind of like still being in grad school, if you will.

SMID: Mm-hm. Can you tell me a little bit about what your training exercises were like at Fort Still [sic; Sill].

CALHOUN: Well, artillery is applying math to—you know, trigonometry to lobbing a projectile, so you'd have classes on, you know, the basic math and the basic commands. Then, you know, you go out in the field and you take turns on the different positions on the guns, and then calling in fire. They did some aerial spotting, where you go up in the plane and direct the fire and then also do it from the command post, where you're watching [unintelligible; 42:14] the rounds into the target. So you're being trained as a—as a forward observer, which is the initial role that you play in the military.

And I'm trying to think of—there—there wasn't—it wasn't a situation where you're spending weeks in the—in the field, the way you do in the actual service, so—

SMID: Mm-hm. Did you feel—

CALHOUN: It was more—go ahead.

SMID: Did you—well, did you feel like you were being adequately trained? Did you feel like whatever it was that you were doing at Fort Still [sic; Sill], you could have directly translated to any situation you would have in—

CALHOUN: Well, I—yeah, I think at the time, I knew the basics. Now, what I didn't realize at the time, which everybody understands now, is there's a difference between learning something academically and becoming proficient at it. To become proficient at it, you have to do it and do it and do it so that you can do it in your sleep. And in the eight weeks that you're there, that doesn't happen. Taking turns with thirty other people, so, you know, you only get a fraction of the time actually doing it yourself.

SMID: Mm-hm. Okay, so—so then you—how long were you there?

CALHOUN: It was the fall, so September through—it was maybe ten, twelve weeks. I can't remember the exact time. But I was out prior to December and spent Christmas at home.

SMID: Okay. And then—so after the holidays, you went, then, on to Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

CALHOUN: Yes.

SMID: And what—what—what were you doing there?

CALHOUN: Okay, so I was assigned to a advanced infantry training unit, so the—this is where the soldiers who have gone through basic training are now—after basic—everybody goes through basic training, and then you're assigned to your kind of unit, so whether it's armor or artillery or infantry or, you know, transportation or the Signal Corps, whatever it is. You then go for more training. So these are the people who are the men who were assigned to be in the infantry and to get additional training, you know, on what to do in battle.

So my role was primarily as a safety officer for those troops, so we go out on—on whatever activity there was, and on the firing ranges I would be the person who would, you know, make sure that people were doing things safely.

SMID: So were the people that you were—you were kind of in command of—were they your peers, or were they—were they people—were they enlisted men?

CALHOUN: Well, these were all enlisted. And they—they were all younger. By this time, I'm twenty-five, and—twenty-four? No, twenty- —yeah, twenty-five. And I'm dealing mostly with kids who are eighteen to twenty-one. They, with a few exceptions, were much less educated. There were very few college graduates who were going through the—getting drafted and going through the basic infantry training.

So most of these kids had a high school education. The best—one of the things the Army—at that point, was [unintelligible; 47:11] for, you know, troops. There were people who could barely read and write. They had—some peoplewere brought in with "we'll teach them how to read and write" kind of stuff. And Fort Jackson being where it was,

it was drawing on a lot of kids from Appalachia, so they were not only uneducated academically, they came from a very, very different environment than my middle school, upstate New York, Dartmouth College, Stanford background.

It was a real eye opener. And one of the things that I got out—which I didn't appreciate at the time, but it's a—it stayed with me—is understanding the wide range of—of lives that exist in America and understanding the effects of poverty in ways that when you go to a school like Dartmouth and then go on to a corporate career, people just miss. And so one of the values of the universal draft would be that people would get to know people from very different backgrounds, with very different attitudes and training. It wasn't easy at the time, but it was very useful.

SMID: So what was the dynamic like? Were a lot of the men difficult to deal with? And I also am curious to know if they knew—if they knew that you had gone to Dartmouth and they knew you were more educated.

CALHOUN: They knew I was more educated because I was an officer. And, you know, there are only a couple of other—one of the things that—that when you're a lieutenant, you're really in between—the career—and especially because I was a [U.S. Army] Reserve officer. Now, what the means is I wasn't a career military. I wasn't planning to make it a career. And so the career—everybody—you know, I'd report to a captain, and, you know, then you go up the chain of majors and colonels. They would socialize in the officers' club, and they had a—a similar background of—you know, their careers.

The enlisted men, as I said, were mostly uneducated, and we also—you know, there's a rule you can't socialize with the enlisted, so you're kind of isolated. There were a couple of other lieutenants I got to know, but you're spending your time with people during the day that you don't see after work, so to speak. And so it was an isolating experience, which became even more so when I was in Vietnam, which you may have read.

But it's—you know, you show up early in the morning, and there is the morning drills, athletic drills, and then you just stay with the troops till the end of the day, and then you go

home. And I lived off campus. I will say one thing about—about the first—when I first arrived at Fort Jackson, I stayed on—on the base until—there was a place for officers to stay until they could get their own place. And I went into the cafeteria to get fed, and I saw what I thought was Cream of Wheat and was trying to put milk on it when somebody explained that those were grits and they went with the eggs.

SMID: [Chuckles.]

CALHOUN: You know, the dif- —you know, being in the South for me was a very different cultural event. Again, this was the South in '68, '69, for—you know, segregation is barely over. There is very little integration off base. And it's—it's—South Carolina today is not exactly a liberal place.

SMID: So what were—what was integration like on—on the base?

CALHOUN: You know, a huge percentage of our troops were—were black, so it was—you know, there were a couple of black officers, but there's primarily—you know, and then a lot of the senior sergeants were black. And, again, since the fifties, mid-fifties, when the—I can't remember when—I guess [President Harry S.] Truman desegregated the military. But, you know, the Army was a place that blacks could get a status, an economic position and have responsibility and a career other of them couldn't get elsewhere. So we had a much higher concentration of black NCOs [non-commissioned officers] than the percentage of blacks in—in society.

SMID: I'm sure that was a very different experience from your four years at Dartmouth, which I assume were highly whitewashed.

CALHOUN: Yeah. One of the other things that they did at that time, which, you know, just tells you how screwed up our society was is that, you know, if someone was court-martialed, they were defended by an officer but not by somebody with legal training, unless it was some maybe very serious case. So I was assigned to be a defense attorney, with no legal experience, by the way—

SMID: [Chuckles.]

CALHOUN: —for a couple of guys. And one of them—these were mainly AWOL [absent without leave] cases or discipline cases. So one of them was a guy who had—it was his second AWOL. In his first AWOL, he had gone and gotten—to visit his girlfriend and had managed to get her pregnant, so he went off again when—when, you know, he realized that she was pregnant. And then, in the process, ended up having sex with her mother, and it was—[Chuckles.] As you said, it was a very different environment than I was used to.

And, you know, this was a guy, kid who didn't graduate from high school, a young black kid. Entertaining as all get-out, but, you know, very strange background. And then, you know, I think about him later as, okay, these were the kids who ended up going to Vietnam to get killed.

SMID: Yeah. Wow.

So. Okay. So now you—so you finish there. You finish at Fort Jackson in 1969, right?

CALHOUN: Right.

SMID: And then you go on to Fort Benning in Georgia.

CALHOUN: Yeah. And—and, again, this was where things went screwy, as I said in my paper, is that I was—when you get your orders, they say, "Okay, you've got a chance to go get some additional training before you go to Vietnam." And what I absolutely wanted to do because I hadn't done it is get a refresher course on artillery, since that's what I'm going to—and then they said, "Aw, well, that's too bad. We—our classes are filled." And it's just mind-blowing that you would send people to a war fundamentally untrained because, you know, a lot of this stuff is theoretical. You've got to have it in your head, and now all I've got is this little manual. And by the time I got there, it was basically nine months from when I had last fired a round.

You know, they gave me—when I landed in Vietnam, they give—they gave us one day of additional training, and then you're out in the field. It was just insane. You know, I understand that the military has done this in lots of wars.

They clearly did it at the beginning of World War II, where they'd send totally untrained troops into battle and so on. But it's a little different when it's you. But—so I couldn't do that.

And then I decided, well, I could go to jungle school or airborne. Jungle school was kind of misery because you—you—you know, went to Panama and lived out in the jungle and tried to survive. It appealed to me at some level, because I was interested in survival, you know, experience. But I thought jumping out of planes would be interesting, and they get you in really good physical shape, and I thought being in good physical shape was something that would be of value to me. So I did that. And I'm glad I did. I had a fascinating experience there. I almost got killed twice but survived.

SMID: Can you—

CALHOUN: Well, I—go ahead.

SMID: Can you elaborate on that a little bit?

CALHOUN: Yeah. So I was the ranking—by that time, I was a first lieutenant, so I was the ranking person in the jump class, so I was the first one out the door. And you went—so on my first jump, I'm standing at the door, in the crouch position, and, you know, the jump master, who is looking for the field, tells you when to go, and then he—he is there, pulling the next guy down, and everybody, to get them all out in time.

So, you know, he says, "Jump," I jump. My chute pops open because it's tied to the cord, and I immediately—there—there—there are two doors in the plane, so there's a guy jumping out on the other side. As soon as my chute opens, I swing into his chute. I am actually physically underneath his chute, and both of us—and that's death if it isn't fixed fast. So I immediately—we pull my cords to move away and swing out. He did the opposite to swing the other way. So we both did what we were trained to do. This was good training because if we hadn't been, we'd have both died.

So I swing out, but when you—when you do this, you're tipping the chute to let the air out faster on one side, so you're coming down faster. So as soon as I get this done, I

look down, and I see that I'm way off the landing zone. I'm coming down in a parking lot. People are starting to run like mad because they think I'm going to drop on them. So I have to pull on the other side to get back on course, and I come swinging over about fifteen feet above the trucks to land in the field, where I'm supposed to, but I'm coming down really hard. And [chuckles] I—I land with a real jolt. So I've got a broken something, but I en- —I didn't. I was properly trained and [invited? 1:01:55]. So that's round one.

Round two was one of the—I don't know if it was the next jumper. There's the third jump. I'm in the door, and it's kind of cl- —low clouds and foggy, and we're coming in, and the jump master thinks he's seen the site, and he tells me to jump. I'm—I'm actually a foot out in the air when he pulls me back, and he says, "We're too early." And I look down, and we're over a river.

So if I had jumped, I would have landed in the water, which is extraordinarily dangerous because you get tangled up in your chute. I probably—it's real difficult not to drown. So that was number two. And then, of course, after he pulled me back, you know, ten seconds later I got to be back in the door and jump again.

SMID: [Chuckles.] Wow. That sounds like a time when you *were* adequately trained.

CALHOUN: Yes. Yes.

SMID: You knew exactly what to do.

CALHOUN: That is correct. And, you know, the—the thing about the airborne training is it *is* very intense. They do really strong physical training, and the—you know, you practice falling and jumping basically ten hours a day for three weeks, so they really do a good job.

SMID: So I—I did want to backtrack just a little bit, because I realized that I forgot to ask you about when you received your order or when you were told that you were going to Vietnam and if you could talk a little bit about that. I read something about it in your essay, and I would—I'd love to hear the story from you.

CALHOUN: Yes, okay. So My commanding officer had been—when I was at Fort Jackson—was a guy who had spent a tour in Vietnam. He expected to go back again. But he—he was one of—he was a career officer, and he fundamentally liked being in battle. So he was what you'd call gung-ho. But he also knew that I was a reluctant warrior and that I was hoping I wouldn't get the orders, because this was at the eighth month time, and there was this kind of rumor that if you didn't get orders to go by month nine or ten of your first year, you weren't going to go. And, you know, a handful of people didn't. They had stateside assignments and so on. And I was hoping that would happen.

So one day, I'm out on the firing range, working as a safety officer, and I—he comes up, and he pulls a—what do you call it?—a thing to carry wounded people in.

SMID: A gurney?

CALHOUN: No, not a gurney, a stretcher.

SMID: A stretcher.

CALHOUN: Stretcher, yeah, a thing with—that you lift on both ends. So he puts it down on the ground, and he says, "Calhoun, would you lie down on this? I want to just test it before you—I picked this up from the firing range the other day. I want to make sure it's okay." So I think that's kind of stupid, but he's my commander; I do what he says. So I lie down. He whips out the orders [unintelligible; 1:05:58] as, "Calhoun, you're—you're—you're heading to Vietnam. I just wanted to make sure you were lying down when you got the news." And he starts laughing. And he was highly entertained. I, of course, was anything but. And so, you know, that was how I got them.

Now, he—he then was nice enough to give me a going-away party at his house, where I got totally drunk and ended up getting sick on his stairs, which his wife was totally unhappy about.

SMID: [Chuckles.]

CALHOUN: I felt bad for her, but—

SMID: Had to calm the nerves.

CALHOUN: It calmed the nerves. [Chuckles.]

SMID: So how did your—your family react to you telling them that you were going to Vietnam? And I don't know if you mentioned this, but if you had a girlfriend at the time or if you were engaged or—I'm not—yeah.

CALHOUN: I—I—I—I had been dating somebody but not terribly seriously, and so I wasn't involved in a long-term commitment. That's really hard for me to tell. I mean, I sent a letter to my parents, and since I wasn't living at home, I don't know, in a lot of ways, how they responded. I think they just assumed that it was likely to happen, so—but this is one of those things that—that they weren't particularly verbose about the issue. I think they tried to be restrained because—concerned about how *I* would feel, so I—I think they—you know, we all kept a stiff upper lip about it.

SMID: Mmm. Okay, so you finish at Fort Benning, and then you head to Vietnam, right?

CALHOUN: Yeah. Well, hold on. I need stop and take a bathroom break?

SMID: Yeah, yeah. Okay.

CALHOUN: I'm going to put the phone down. I'll be right back.

[Recording interruption.]

SMID: All right. So you're heading to Vietnam. Did you have any time off between being in Fort Benning and going—and shipping out, or no?

CALHOUN: Yes, I had about a month. And I crossed the country. I visited some friends. I ended up spending my last week in Palo Alto [California], where Stanford—visiting—staying with classmates from business school and then, you know, headed off from there.

And while I was there, I ended up meeting a girl who was in the graduate program at Stanford that I ended up staying in contact with and ended up marrying. We later got divorced, but I developed a relationship during that week.

SMID: Mmm. Wow. What a week!

CALHOUN: Yeah.

SMID: Okay. So can you just kind of take me with you from—from the States to Vietnam?

CALHOUN: One more—

SMID: Oh, yeah, sorry.

CALHOUN: All right. When I was—I had visited some friends in New York on my way out, before I headed west. And, you know, again, these were former roommates from Stanford. And [chuckles] I remembered vividly one of them—you know, people didn't know how to react, so he said, "Keep your head down, and we'll be in the stands cheering for you." You know, it was this inability to understand that it was a war; it wasn't a athletic contest. And his intent was good, but it's a kind of a screwy view or inarticulate view of his concern.

SMID: Did you feel like that's kind of how all of your friends were reacting?

CALHOUN: Yeah.

SMID: They didn't really know how—what to do.

CALHOUN: Yes. They didn't talk about it much then, and clearly they didn't talk about it at all when I got back.

SMID: How about now?

CALHOUN: [Sighs.] Very little. You have—today you get—somebody meets you, and they—they hear you were in Vietnam, they say, "Thank you for your service," and I consider that a bullshit statement. I resent it when they say it because they didn't say it when I came back. And I'm not talking about the

people I knew then, but—so, no, other than other Vietnam vets, there's nobody I—I can talk to about it, and people tend—even when I tell them some stories, they don't ask other stories. Nobody really talks about it. They are unwilling to talk.

SMID: Well, so for—for the time that you were in Vietnam, I have kind of an outline from your essay, but I figure I want to hear any stories that you're willing to tell or the ones that were most meaningful to you.

CALHOUN: Sure.

SMID: Okay, yeah, just go ahead and—

CALHOUN: So, you know, I—I—when we flew in at night, the sky was, you know, illuminated by artillery fire, so I think I'm going right into a battle. It wasn't the case. A lot of it was what we call H&I, harassment and interdiction fire, which the artillery sends out just in the free fire zones to keep the VC [Viet Cong] from traveling freely. Also some illumination around—which were probably requested by infantry units. I didn't know that at the time. But anyways, it wasn't that I was in a big fire, but it seemed like that.

So I get to the base, and, you know, it was hard to sleep that night because I'm a—you know, they'd warn you what to do if there's a rocket, you know, thing, so—and the base had been rocketed at various times, meaning that the VC had launched a rocket that would land in the—on the base camp. So, you know, that was unnerving, to say the least.

I was then assigned—well, I went through this training—and I was part of the 1st Infantry Division, so I went to this one- or two-day class, where we had a chance to direct fire [at another as far as? 1:14:41] being a forward observer. They put us on trucks. We'd go north to the—like a base camp, which is about an hour away. And, you know, I'm highly nervous about being on the road, you know, unprotected, thinking that we'd be attacked at any time. You know, it was a pretty secure area at the time, so it wasn't an issue, but, you know, what did I know at the time?

Then, you know, I complained to the colonel there that when I got my orders to go back to where I had started from, to join up with my unit, you know, “Why did I do this?”—he didn’t like the fact that I criticized him and said, “You need to learn to keep your mouth shut when”—so—and he was right. I was whining about something, and in hindsight I would have [unintelligible; 1:15:51] his position.

So I get assigned to the unit as a forward observer. And the first thing we do is we go on this encirclement of a village in the Củ Chi area. It’s a place that now is famous for the tunnels that are underneath it. And it was a village seal. The ARVN [pronounced AR-vin], meaning the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, our side on—the South Vietnamese army. And the U.S. Army did this encirclement so that they would—we knew there were VC in the—in the village, and sealed off the entries.

And it was an effective operation, so they kept it quiet. The VC didn’t realize what was happening until it was too late. As soon as dark hit, base dark, they tried to break out, and there are firefights all over the place. And the sky is lit up with rounds of ammo going off in all directions. Fortunately for me, although I’m just lying there in terror, they weren’t attacking my company at the time; they were hitting other areas.

So I get through the night. Then the next few days are kind of quiet. We participated in walking through the village in a certain area. Since I was a forward observer and there wasn’t any use for artillery, I was kind of there as—almost as a tourist, in a sense, just watching what was going on. And it was fascinating to see the village life because the [recording glitch; Viets? 1:18:12] continue to do their thing, and the women were cooking—and seeing how they lived in the third world, primitive society.

And then went out with - on a patrol, some of the tunnels. And, you know, we didn’t see anything at that time. But a day later, the unit I was in found—a VC popped his head up, and they captured him. He was, like, fifty feet from where I’d been sleeping.

SMID: [Sharp intake of breath.]

CALHOUN: And brought him in. And, you know, I took pictures of him and showed him my camera, and my commanding officer said, “Don’t do that. He’ll think you’re giving him a gift.” And [laughs] I didn’t want to give my camera away. But, you know, he’s—here is a guy who is the enemy, and I’m sitting there essentially talking to him through sign language. And he was a kind of scrawny, thin, malnourished guy—you know, age indeterminate.

And, you know, it was—as I said, it was an effective operation. A lot of VC captured, a number killed, low casualty count on our side. So—and we got—

SMID: I have a question before you go on. So how did—how was the—the member of the VC treated? Was he treated humanely, or was it—

CALHOUN: Yeah.

SMID: —was he abused?

CALHOUN: Yeah, see, you know, you’re taking a prisoner who you have to be careful with because if he could, he’d kill you, so it’s like taking a prisoner in the U.S. who thinks he’s going to go to jail and so on. This is a different environment. But he wasn’t mistreated in—in the sense that you’re referring to.

SMID: Okay.

CALHOUN: Then we—the next operation was your classic helicopter ride into an area—we were going to go out on patrol for a week, and I—I actually don’t know where it was in relationship to the first place, but it was in a broader area. And the whole approach [recording glitch; unintelligible; 1:21:27]. Hiked through during the day, just company-size strength, and looking for any signs. And then at night you’d go into an ambush position along a trail to see if any VC headed by.

So the first night, where we’re hunkering down, the captain gets this radio message that a VC battalion had been spotted. Well, a battalion is three times the size of a company, so I’m thinking, *Holy crap! That’s a lot of enemy*

headed our way. So needless to say, I didn't get much sleep *that* night.

It turns out that when they say "a battalion is headed your way," it means "could be an element of a battalion," meaning it could just be a ten-man patrol, or, you know, there were—a lot of these were rumors. And so, you know, 95 percent of the time, nothing—these kind of warnings didn't mean anything. But at the time, I was certain we were engaged—going to be engaged and overwhelmed in a battle sometime during the night.

SMID: So I've a question for you. I've read a little bit in your essay—it seems like you—you—the religion played a pretty big role in your experience in Vietnam, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about your faith life and—and specifically in the Vietnam War context.

CALHOUN: I had—I had grown up as a Presbyterian and had been pretty active right through most of high school. But when I got to Dartmouth, I stopped attending church. And, you know, this is not dissimilar to what happens to [unintelligible; probably? 1:23:47] youth today. And so the old saying, "There are no atheists in a foxhole" just hit me at that point in time, and so I went back to, you know, remembering the prayers I had been taught. That's all I can say.

SMID: Okay.

CALHOUN: So then—we didn't actually see much action on patrol, and it went on for a number of days. There was one night that, when we were in ambush positions, we—somebody thought they saw something or maybe not, and so we called for an elimination round. And this was where my lack of training showed. I didn't follow a command structure on doing it properly, and it was clear that—again, it wasn't routine. I knew academically what I was supposed to do, but doing it under pressure, on command, by the book, I was pretty rough at it. So when I did get back, I got a talk-to from the—the major. You know, nobody got hurt, and we're not sure whether there were any VC there or not.

But the other part of this was the whole experience of hiking through the jungle with, you know, your standard seventy-

five-pound pack, a weapon. I would carry an M16 [rifle], plus I had a .45 [caliber pistol] on my belt, and you wore a vest. Your sleeves are closed at the ends to make sure mosquitoes don't go up. Same with your legs and boots, so that you're totally sealed off. A metal helmet. It's just designed to be a sauna, the temperatures.

And then at night, when you sleep, in one spot we were in a place where we're lying on the ground. It starts raining, and you know, the pools of water start to form where you're trying to sleep, so you're trying to keep your head out of the water to be able to breathe properly. You're wrapped in what's called a poncho liner, which is an ultra-thin, very dryable blanket. And it's pretty stinky, pretty miserable.

You eat the C-Rations, and so this is food that has—most of the things are in cans, and there's some meat in the cans, which was always better warmed up than cold. And, you know, you can't start fires, but what we would do is take the explosive material that's used to blow up things, take off the—pull off a little piece of it and light it. And when it's not contained, it burns with an intense heat. What makes it explosive is if you pack material around it, and then, when the gases can't expand fast enough, then that's where the explosion takes place. Without that containment, it just burns intensely. So you'd hold the—the top of the can that you'd opened with a small can opener that comes with the pack and hold it over the flame to heat it up and try not to drop it because if you dropped it on the explosive, then it would explode. So that—that's how you fed yourself.

SMID: Jeez.

CALHOUN: So then, after we'd been out there for I think five days, we get word that we're going to be picked up that day, so it's a day or two early, and by "picked up"—you know, they get a fleet of helicopters coming in—and I still have pictures of this on my—in my office that I took then. And, you know, it's a quite dramatic kind of event because you put down the—somebody pulls a smoke grenade to color, and then you talk about, you know, "This is the color that you should be looking for." So they come in.

But just before that, after we had received the orders that we're going to go back, one of the troops pulls out a little portable transistor radio, which he wasn't supposed to have because you don't want unnecessary sounds. But, you know, it's not like we're—a hundred men milling around isn't exactly quiet. So he turns it on, and the first song is "Oh Happy Day." Have you ever heard this song?

SMID: I have, yeah.

CALHOUN: It's a hymnal.

SMID: I have. Yeah, I have.

CALHOUN: Okay. And it was a popular pop song at the time. So that instantly became my favorite gospel song because it was such perfectly timed.

SMID: Yeah. Wow. You're leaving.

CALHOUN: By the way, the other thing—this is going back, when I looked at the pictures on my wall. The other picture I have is from the time when we were doing the village seal, of a young girl, probably ten years old, eight, ten, and she's holding her baby brother, who is probably a year old, on her hip. Her sleeve is torn. She's an attractive girl. Behind her is a defoliated field, defoliated with—

SMID: Agent Orange.

CALHOUN: —Agent Orange, and—but she was walking down the road. You know, she—these kids were just living with all this military around, but she posed for me and smiled, and that became my Christmas card that year.

SMID: Wow. So what were your interactions like with the Vietnamese people who were VC? Were they friendly, or were they scared of American troops, or what was that like?

CALHOUN: All the people that I met were friendly, so, you know, one doesn't know what they were thinking. And there was a section of the community that, you know, serviced the American troops, so we had a guy who ran a laundry service, so he'd come out to the fire bases, and, you know,

you'd give him your dirty laundry, and he'd bring it back in a couple days.

There were young women who came out and gave haircuts, and, you know, so there was a—I was never in a—with one exception, I was never in a—one time—I was never in a town, you know, that was a, quote, tourist type. I was al- —always in the field. So I don't know—I never went to one of the Saigon nightclubs or anything like that. So other than seeing the Vietnamese, the tourists, the base camps or, you know, people along the highway as we were passing by, I had very little contact with the Vietnamese.

The Vietnamese I *did* get to know, like the guy who ran the laundry service, also was a teacher, and he—you know, I've often thought about him, because when the communists came in, what did they do? They went after the people who were teachers and anybody who had had any real contact with Americans. But, you know, how would you ever find out what happened? So, you know, that's about—everybody else I met with—I grew to really like them.

SMID: Yeah. So from—so from there, where—where did you go?

CALHOUN: Okay. So when I came back in, I got orders to go to another battery, and this would become the first of many transfers, to be a fire direction officer. So this is a person who runs the—when the orders—fire commands come in from the forward observer, the fire direction team is the one who does the calculations and gives the directions to the guns and then controls the firing.

So I became a fire direction officer. This was also another case where, awkwardly trained—the crew I was put in charge of was composed of military—or National Guard [of the U.S.] people from New Hampshire. Well, when they found out I was from Dartmouth—now, these are all high school grads, no college, little college—they did their best to put me down. And, again, I'm a green guy with no experience, and, you know, I'm just trying to get along.

But they—there was one guy especially that, you know—six months later, if I had run into someone like that, I would have

had him court-martialed for insolence, but, you know, when you're first there, that's hard to do.

SMID: So what would they say about Dartmouth?

CALHOUN: It wasn't Dartmouth, it was just me. And it's, you know, the fact that I didn't really know what I was doing, which I didn't.

SMID: Right.

CALHOUN: And they would have preferred that I just go away, so—

SMID: Mm-hm.

CALHOUN: And you've got to live with these people. I mean, you're sleeping in the same rooms with them—I mean, or bunker. So it was an unpleasant experience. The CEO—or CO, commanding officer, you know, could have cared less. And it's really funny. In my entire time in Vietnam, and I was in a number of different batteries, I don't ever remember a commanding officer actually working with me to see that I was trained, to help me out. It was, like, "You do your thing, and I'll do my thing." And so, you know, it's a very—was a very isolating experience. So—

SMID: You mentioned in your—I'm sorry. You mentioned in your essay someone named Captain Harvey [P.] Kelly.

CALHOUN: Yeah, he was my infantry commander, where I was a forward observer. And he was nice. He did try to help me. Unfortunately, he got killed a month after I left the unit. He was—and this was partly the result of how the war was fought. Body count was important. They ran into some VC, and the VC ran away, and Capt. Kelly ran after them. (And I heard all this from a friend who was a platoon leader.) And he ended up running by himself, and the captain had a pistol, and this guy had an M16. The guy turned around and just blew him away.

One of the things you see all the time in movies and TV, guys with pistols firing after people with automatic weapons, and it's like—it's a joke, you know. So Kelly was a professional, trying to do his job, but he went off by himself, and he should never have done that, and it cost his life.

SMID: Mmm.

So when you were serving as a fire direction officer and you were being transferred to all these units, like, why exactly the overturn [sic; turnover], why weren't you allowed to just kind of stay in one place and build rapport with the people in your command?

CALHOUN: [Chuckles.] In one sense, I don't know. But in another sense, it was—you know, I was a fire direction officer—and I want to come back to that in a second. But the next turn was to be an executive officer. And so these are the step-ups you do, and in—in that case, it made sense. I mean, they're moving you through the ranks. And since I was a first lieutenant, I was the person, because—and I got to be first lieutenant, by the way, because I had had this two-year delay in business school.

And it was all time sensitive, and so the clock is ticking once you're commissioned, even if you're not on active duty. So I got to be a first lieutenant when I arrived in Vietnam, whereas most people in the same boat would have been second lieutenants, so that's why they were theoretically moving me up. And, you know, it's some central command thing out of the Pentagon; it's not like the battalion commander doing it in an intelligent way.

So I do want to talk about the fact that that when I was a fire direction officer, early on—again, because of my lack of training, I shot out. "Shot out" means the round went where it wasn't supposed to. In this case, there were—the forward observer was calling in fire to set up a perimeter defense, and we ended up putting the round, instead of, you know, a kilometer away, right next to where he was, and by "right next to" I mean a hundred yards away. Nobody got hurt, but easily, easily could have killed some Americans with that because of the mistakes that the sergeant who was doing the calculation and my failure to check him properly resulted in [unintelligible; 1:42:11].

And it has haunted me ever since then because it's so scary that you could have k- —that I could have allowed something that, you know, killed other Americans. And—

SMID: All because of—

CALHOUN: And I [unintelligible; 1:42:30] guy, who was a lieutenant in the armor in Iraq War I [the 2003 invasion of Iraq], who actually did kill Americans, and I don't know how he—you know, it's one of these things. You're a dead man walking for the rest of your life.

SMID: Yeah. I'm sure it's—

CALHOUN: I was just lucky. But, you know, again, you know, from a bigger perspective, it was because I had so little experience.

SMID: Right, yeah.

CALHOUN: This was the first couple of weeks when I was doing the job. It's just—it was crazy. So they moved me to be an XO, so—XO means executive officer. The executive officer is the guy who the guns report to and takes the commands from the fire directions crew and gives the commands to the guns.

SMID: So how many guns would there have been?

CALHOUN: This was a 105 Howitzer battery, meaning 105 mm-diameter shell. And they are the core artillery piece for—in infantry units because they're flexible, they're light, the crew can lift them up and move them around fast, they get out rounds really fast. Get five or six rounds a minute out of one if you're really tuned in. And so—I was later in a one-five-five [155 mm] unit, and it's much heavier. It's harder to maneuver the guns. And then they go up even bigger. So from a quick combat sense, the 105 is—is a beautiful weapon.

So the executive officer goes in, sets up the guns so that—again, it's all the trig stuff. So you line up the guns so that when the XO is giving a command, the guns are all pointed in the right direction, and the guns have to be set so that they're aimed through a—a post. So you set a post out in front, and then everything works off of that. And when they - the gunner is told to orient in a different direction, he's looking through his scope at that post to make sure he's lined up for the reading that he needs to fire on.

So that's what an executive officer does.

SMID: Okay.

CALHOUN: So I did that. Then—I can't remember when I changed to another unit or that was it for the time. I think that was it for the time. And then the 1st Division went home, and so then I got assigned another unit, so there was that kind of thing.

And one of the—so we would move from point to point based on where the—the infantry was, because you can fire about five or six miles, but it's not infinite, so if the infantry was going to go to a certain area, then they'd move the artillery to set up near them to support them. And I ended up in a lot of different places. This is all in what's called the III Corps [spoken as three corps] area, which is—Saigon isn't a III Corps, but it goes from the [Mekong] Delta up to the [Central] Highlands and from the ocean up to Cambodia.

And so we moved around there. Some of the times, we would move by truck if we were near one of the roads. Other times, we'd move by helicopter, where a [Boeing CH-47] Chinook helicopter would come in. You attach the guns to it, and the crew would get inside the helicopter. And so you have a gun with its crew flying through the air to the next spot. And then I would [unintelligible; 1:47:39] the guns and be ready to fire at that point.

[recording interruption or glitch; 1:47:45]

—had been a big rubber-producing area. And we went into this field right next to it, and we were told to try not to blow up any of the rubber trees because it would cost the U.S. government money, because we would then pay for the tree. Very weird. But otherwise, we're blowing up things, you know, in these free-fire zones and responding to calls from infantry.

And so we—this was, like, in January or so, and we got the, you know, word that the 1st Division was going home, which didn't mean that we would, but the, quote, "division" would. What that really meant is that the command structure was going, and this was part of the—so this is now in 1970, and the draw-down was beginning. But we were all on one-year

tours, so you didn't go home with your unit the way it's done today. And so—but we were brought out of the field into the home base, where the weapons were going to be packed up and shipped out. And so there's a few days of—of, you know, kind of time off and clean showers and things, so that was nice. And then we got reassigned.

Now, my orders at that point were to go to the 4th [Infantry] Division in the Highlands, in the II Corps [spoken as second corps] area. This was north of where I'd been serving. And I got there, and almost before I could unpack, I got orders to go back to the Saigon area to be a general's aide. And, again, this was probably—I know it was done because I was a Dartmouth grad, and I had met the prior aide for this general when he had visited at some point, and so he thought I would be a good choice to replace him when *he* went home.

This was II [spoken as second] Field Force artillery, which was a—had bigger guns than the division artillery and played supporting roles. Again, I was untrained and ill-equipped to be a general's aide at that point. I did not know—I had not spent enough time in helicopters to understand the commands. And the general—nobody trained me, so the general says, "Oh, do this." And I'm thinking, *What the hell does "this" mean?*

And so after a couple of weeks, he got fed up with me and replaced me with a captain from [the U.S. Military Academy at [West Point]. Well, the captain from West Point—one, he wasn't authorized to have—in a sleepy area that hadn't had any VC activity for some time, and we did very little shooting. We even had young women who would come out and clean the—the ground facilities that were, in relationship to every place else, quite nice, which, again, was kind of a weird juxtaposition.

At one point, this woman came out—two girls, and one of them spoke very good English, and I said, "Where did you learn your English?" And she was, you know, like, twenty, twenty-one, attractive, long black hair, wearing an áo dài [pronounced OWE die, a Vietnamese traditional garment]—do you know what that means?

SMID: I don’t, no.

CALHOUN: Oh, that’s the—the typical Vietnamese dress for women.

SMID: Oh, okay.

CALHOUN: So black pants and then this white top that has flowing white—it’s like a skirt except the—the skirt is slit so when—when the woman walks, you have these kind of bouncing pieces of fabric, you know, that then uncover these black pajama-type dress—it was very attractive, especially if you’ve been out in the field for a long time and this attractive young girl comes up speaking good English. And it turns out she had been an exchange student in Palo Alto, California.

SMID: Wow.

CALHOUN: And I often wondered what happened to her. Now, keep in mind that I lived in Palo Alto, California, for two years. [Chuckles.] And she’d gone to one of the local high schools. And I really wonder what happened to her. She was obviously [unintelligible; 1:53:40] from a more privileged family, and she was out there, actually trying to raise funds for some orphanage or something. But I was always struck by, you know, having a chance to meet her, and hope she got out okay.

SMID: Mm-hm.

CALHOUN: So after being there a few weeks, we got —the Cambodian invasion got underway, and we were assigned to go up to the Cambodian border in preparation for the infantry going across the border. When we got to that, it was a hot area, meaning there were VC in the area, and the infantry ran across a rocket in the field that they had just —the VC had just run away from, so—meaning they were in the area.

And there was some firing that night. There were some rockets or mortar or whatever that landed in the base, but not, you know, heavy. But we did have what was called Puff, the Magic Dragon [Douglas AC-47 Spooky] come out to protect our borders. And these were gunships with these Gatling guns and provided this surreal firing experience. You’d see the light before you heard the sound. And the

sound because so many bullets were coming out, was like a [unintelligible; 1:55:34] or buzz saw sound. And so the—it was a very surreal night.

But we were there only a couple of nights, and we got pulled out to go further west and into Cambodia. And this was, you know, about ten miles across the border. And all the roads in Vietnam that I'd been on had been defoliated by Agent Orange, on both sides, so there was—and the people couldn't get close in to ambush. But when we were going into Cambodia, that hadn't been done, and so we're going down these roads, where the forest is right up next to the road, which is perfect ambush territory. It was kind of, again, a scary experience, although nobody ever got hurt on that road that I know of.

And, you know, we drove by, you know, a little village of Cambodians, who were staring at this big military force marching through or driving through, and it was like—I couldn't imagine what was going through their brains, because this was unlike anything they'd ever seen. They'd probably never seen any white people before, or black people, for that—they were very primitive. They're darker-skinned than the Vietnamese. But it was an interesting experience.

Then when we got into our area where we set up the fire base, it was a very red clay, and some of the equipment that I kept after the war still has that red clay on it from that experience.

SMID: So just for the sake of time, because I know that you don't have very much, I wondered if you could tell me a little bit about what it was like coming home from the war and your adjustment.

CALHOUN: Sure. So after the time in Cambodia, came back to base in—that was relatively quiet. The Cambodian invasion had in fact stopped the North Vietnamese for some point in time, and the war really died—quieted down for the area we were in. So I was there for a few months before I came back.

The trip—the planes didn't go that far, so we had to land twice to refuel. So the plane left Saigon, landed in Japan.

We were there for a while. Then flew to Anchorage [Alaska], to an air base outside of Anchorage, and we were there for a few hours. We got off the plane. You know, touched ground in Alaska so I can say I've been in Alaska. And then flew back to a base near Sacramento [California], and we land about one in the morning or two in the morning, and, you know, climb out.

Now, the enlisted men had to be—if they didn't have family picking them up, which there were a couple of people who did—but mostly they had to be shipped off to Oakland [California] to be in a barracks there before they were reassigned or if they were finished, to be processed out.

I was told, "Well, you can go where you want." So I called up this girl from Stanford that I had been with and asked her if she could come pick me up, and she said, "It's the middle of the night. You know, it's two hours." And I said, "I just got back from Vietnam. Can you get in the car"—I mean, I had to talk to her for about [unintelligible; 1:59:55] to wake her up enough to—so she came and picked me up. I got a couple of hours' sleep and then went to Oakland in the morning to process out. And then I was out. That was it.

None of the things that happen today—and a lot of things that changed were changed because of what we went through, where I was with a—you know, nobody who had been through my experience. So walked out. You know, I'm now in civilian clothes, and, you know, no connection with the military. Don't know anybody at this point who had been to Vietnam. And go, you know, see my friends from business school and this girl, and that's it.

SMID: Wow.

CALHOUN: And quickly learned that nobody was interested in what I'd been doing, and so never got to talk to anybody about it until 2004, when I participated in the John [F.] Kerry campaign with the Veterans for Kerry. And then ended up meeting a lot of fellow vets. And that's the first time since I got back that I was able to talk to people and share my experience.

SMID: Do you still keep in contact with the people that you met then?

CALHOUN: Some—some of them. But I've also joined—and one actually is [James] "Jim" Rassman, and Jim is the guy that Kerry pulled out of the water [the Bay Hap River on March 13, 1969]. Do you remember that story?

SMID: Yes, I do.

CALHOUN: Okay. Well, I met, in fact—he lives here in Oregon, down in Florence. I'm going to—we're going down to have dinner with him and his wife and another Iraqi vet in a couple of weeks, so I've stayed in touch with him.

It was interesting to know the guy that Kerry was celebrating, that the Swift Boat people [members or supporters of Swift Boat Veterans for Truth] were attacking and saying it didn't happen when I'm talking to the guy who it happened to and heard it straight from his lips.

SMID: So do you feel like—how long do you feel like it took you to kind of get back into the groove of civilian life and, like,—especially given that you didn't have any sort of emotional outlet for what you'd gone through? Or do you feel like you never really were able to—to kind of, I guess, forget?

CALHOUN: Well, nobody ever forgets. The mere fact that we've been talking for over two hours says that you don't forget. But, you know, I was fortunate in my experience in that I didn't have, directly in front of me, people being blown up or mangled. And so, you know, the—the really heavy fighting was all around me but not up close, personal. And so I was lucky from that perspective.

You know, because I had gone in when I was older than most of the people—you know, by the time I came back, I was twenty-six. I had two degrees from strong universities. I knew how to think. I had perspective. I could look at the geopolitical aspects as well as the personal aspects and put it in context and understand it in ways that most of the troops could not.

You know, I talked to a lot of these guys who I got to know later, during the Kerry campaign, so they said they went over gung-ho, thinking it was [actor] John Wayne time. And they

had no clue what they were facing. I had no illusions as to what I was going to face. So mentally it wasn't a visible thing to me, even, for most of the time. And I didn't have, you know, horrific flashbacks. You know, it's like anything else. A certain smell takes me back.

When people—when we invaded Iraq and the war started there, that took all of us back, because it was the same thing except drier. So, you know, you don't know what you can—you know, you step on the wrong thing, you're blown up. The enemy is all around you. They're not wearing uniforms. There's no front line. It was a very similar experience from the terror perspective and the uncertainty and having to make quick decisions of who you shot and who you didn't shoot. And so—yeah.

SMID: Well, just to conclude, is there anything that you'd like to—to say, any closing remarks?

CALHOUN: I don't think so. I appreciate being able to do this. I appreciate what the school is doing with this experience. I think what—and I apologize for not remembering his name, but the prior Dartmouth president, who has started this project and how has reached out to veterans. I really appreciate what he has done.

SMID: Well, we really appreciate your help, and I appreciate you taking the time to do this. I'm really grateful.

[End of interview.]