William J. Donahue
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Dani Halperin ‘28

DANI HALPERIN: This is Dani Halperin. Today is February 11, 2025, and I am conducting this oral history interview for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. I am conducting this interview with Mr. William Donahue. This interview is taking place in person in Novack Cafe, study room 71, on the campus of Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Mr. Donahue, thank you for speaking to me today.

WILLIAM J. DONAHUE: Oh, you're quite welcome. I'm flattered.

HALPERIN: So, let's just start off with where and when were you born?

DONAHUE: I was born in Washington, D.C., on the 15th of May, 1944.

HALPERIN: So that was during World War II?

DONAHUE: Yeah, my dad was in Officer Candidate School in Orlando [FL] when he got the news that he was the father of twins and he would not see us until after he got discharged, which was after V-J [Victory over Japan] Day, which was August of 1945.

HALPERIN: Wow. What did your parents do?

DONAHUE: My father was a hearing examiner for the Federal Communications Commission. That job title is now called Administrative Law Judge. And my mother was Chief of the Economic Policy Reporting Staff for the State Department — a job she held since the 1930s, and at the time she was hired, she was the highest-ranking woman in the State Department.

HALPERIN: Wow. So they both had full-time jobs.

DONAHUE: Oh, yeah, yeah. They had good jobs. Yeah, they worked. We lived in Bethesda, Maryland, a suburb of Washington [D.C.] and yeah.

HALPERIN: So both your parents worked in the government, and your dad was in the military. Did that influence your upbringing by giving you a sense of civic responsibility?

DONAHUE: I guess it did, yeah, I think so.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] And you said you have a twin?

DONAHUE: I have a twin sister, Bridget.

HALPERIN: Oh wow!

DONAHUE: Yeah, I'm two minutes older.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] Oh my goodness! What kind of school did you go to when you were growing up?

DONAHUE: What kind of school?

HALPERIN: Like public or private.

DONAHUE: Yeah, I went to public schools. And my high school, Walter Johnson Senior High School [MD], the only high school in the country named after a baseball player, was a very, very good [school.] I think 92% of our graduates went on to college.

HALPERIN: Wow!

DONAHUE: You know, all the students were children of these government workers, you know, the deep state.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: So they were all bright, you know.

HALPERIN: So was it a very, like, insulated school?

DONAHUE: No, I don't think so. No.

HALPERIN: Was it common for schools like at that time, for that high of a percent of–

DONAHUE: I think around there was– and there was Bethesda Chevy Chase, that was our big rival school. And, some other– Richard Montgomery– some other schools like that, but they all sent lots to–

HALPERIN: Going to record on this as well. [Referring to the Dolby On app]

DONAHUE: –lots to college.

HALPERIN: And do you have any other siblings, other than your twin sister?

DONAHUE: Nope, that's it.

HALPERIN: Wow. When you were growing up, did you ever think that you were going to be in the military or plan for it?

DONAHUE: Yeah, my dad was in the Army Air Corps, and I thought that I would be in the United States Air Force. But I wanted to be a pilot, and I had to get glasses my freshman year in college, and so, that ended that idea.

HALPERIN: Wow. What about the Air Force did you like?

DONAHUE: Well, just my father was in it, and I like airplanes.

HALPERIN: Yeah. What were your political beliefs like growing up? Or did you have strong political–

DONAHUE: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. My parents were both Democrats. They're both solid Democrats. They really liked FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt], and they liked John [F.] Kennedy. And so, when growing up, we grew up as Democrats, yeah.

HALPERIN: Would you say that most of your school at that time was Democrats?

DONAHUE: I think so. It wasn't, we weren't– we certainly weren't politically divided. So, you didn't really know your other students' points of view, but everybody loved John Kennedy.

HALPERIN: Yeah, definitely. Who was the President when you were in high school?

DONAHUE: Well, Kennedy was– I graduated high school in 1962. Kennedy was president, was elected president in 1960 and before him, it was a Dwight [D.] Eisenhower.

HALPERIN: Yeah. That's so interesting. Do you think that everyone loved Kennedy while he was president, or after he got assassinated?

DONAHUE: No, while. He brought a real breath of fresh air to the to the government.

HALPERIN: That's so interesting. Must have been a good time to be in D.C.

DONAHUE: It was a good time to be a young person in DC.

HALPERIN: So how did you choose Colby [Colby College, ME]?

DONAHUE: I applied to a bunch of schools, and the two best I got into was University of Pennsylvania and Colby. And I wanted to get as far away from my

parents as I could, and Colby, at that time, took, it was an overnight trip. The interstate didn't go up to Waterville, Maine.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: So I chose Colby.

HALPERIN: What did you apply for, like, with your major?

DONAHUE: Oh, I was a European history major.

HALPERIN: Oh, wow!

DONAHUE: I would have been American history, but there was only one real professor who taught it, and I disliked him.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] Do you think that your dad, having been in World War Two, influenced your choice to do European history?

DONAHUE: No, he was an American history major, and I guess I wanted to be like him. So, it was the closest thing. When we were young, Bridget and I were young, he made us memorize the Presidents the United States in the order that they served.

HALPERIN: Wow!

DONAHUE: So I can still do that today.

HALPERIN: That's such a great skill. [Laughter] Good trick. Where did Bridget go?

DONAHUE: She went to Connecticut College. At that time, it was Connecticut College for Women.

HALPERIN: Was, but Colby, was co-ed?

DONAHUE: Yeah, Colby was co-ed, yeah. So the thing about Colby was, it was about 60% men and 40% women. And we used to say that the women didn't go there to get a BA [Bachelor of Arts], they went there to get an Mrs. You know, at that time you were supposed to, you know, get married right out of college and have a child before we were 25. And, the admission rate for women was much, was much more competitive than it was for men.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: That's so, why do you think that was?

DONAHUE: You know, [pause] I think that women– I think that the women who went to Colby went there to get a husband, and I think the choices of getting a good husband were pretty good.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: That's what I think.

HALPERIN: I mean since– at that time– was Colby filled with a lot of people who maybe had very comfortable childhoods?

DONAHUE: Yeah, I think so. I think 60% went to private school.

HALPERIN: Yeah, that makes sense. Do you think that the men at Colby treated the women with that thought in mind, that they were just there to get–

DONAHUE: Probably, I mean, you know, I don't know.

HALPERIN: Do, what was the political climate like on campus? I mean, now it's definitely a liberal arts college and pretty political. But was it like that at the time?

DONAHUE: I don't know that it was so political. Yeah, I mean, politics wasn't that big a thing back then. It started to get all over the country. It started to get political with the Vietnam War.

HALPERIN: Yeah. Were there any student protests at Colby?

DONAHUE: No. In fact, Playboy Magazine ran an article about colleges titled "Where the Action Ain't." Colby was one of them.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] Oh, goodness, yeah.

DONAHUE: That was after, that was after I graduated.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] How did you feel about that article?

DONAHUE: I guess I thought it was about right. I remember being [in] my senior year. Some students, freshmen, I think, were busted because they were smoking dope in their dorm room, and they'd put wet towels underneath the bottom of the doors. And I was, I remember thinking, oh, boy, terrible, you know.

HALPERIN: Yeah [Laughter]. And when you were on campus did you ever think about how few protests there were?

DONAHUE: No. It didn't cross my mind.

HALPERIN: So you wouldn't say you were thinking that much about politics while you were at Colby?

DONAHUE: No. That's right.

HALPERIN: What about when John F. Kennedy was assassinated?

DONAHUE: That was really a crushing blow for the whole country and the college. I remember, it was a Saturday. I was playing touch football out on the quad, and somebody announced from a dorm window upstairs that the President's just been shot, and the game broke up, and everybody went back to their, it was my fraternity house, and turned on the television. [Everyone] was just glued to the TV set all day, and the following day.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: And I remember it rained very hard that night, and our president took a walk in the rain. Anyway.

HALPERIN: That's very interesting. What did, did Colby cancel classes or do anything?

DONAHUE: I think that they did cancel class. Certainly, you didn't have to go to class if you didn't want to. And I think a lot of teachers didn't teach.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: But that would have been the Monday following.

HALPERIN: Wow. And how did, how did you feel personally?

DONAHUE: Well, I felt terrible, but I didn't want it to disrupt our lives at Colby. I didn't want things grind to a halt. I wanted to, yeah, keep on going to class and keep on doing whatever.

HALPERIN: Is Colby, one of the colleges that’s in a very small town, so it–

DONAHUE: Waterville

HALPERIN: So it feels like a little bubble?

DONAHUE: I don't know. Waterville, at the time, was the sixth biggest city in Maine, and it was populated mostly with French Canadian folks. There was a paper mill across the Kennebec River in Winslow, Maine. Here's Waterville and then there's Winslow. And a lot of those people from, that live in Waterville, worked at that mill.

HALPERIN: Wow!

DONAHUE: There were log drives until 1968. Huge log drives come down the Connecticut River.

HALPERIN: Wow!

DONAHUE: In the spring, you know, with men,

HALPERIN: Oh my goodness, the Connecticut River–

DONAHUE: Yeah, yeah– I'm sorry, the Kennebunk River.

HALPERIN: So were outdoor activities a very big part of Colby?

DONAHUE: Oh yeah. Oh yeah.

HALPERIN: What did, what did you participate in outside of classes?

DONAHUE: Well, I skied some. We, the fraternity I was in was quite the ski fraternity. And I just played, you know, all sorts of sports.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: You know, football and basketball and baseball. We had something we called roofball.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] What's roof ball?

DONAHUE: Oh, you threw a ball up on this roof that had lots of angles, a tennis ball. And then you try to catch it when it came down, you try to throw it up so that your opponent couldn't tell which way it's going to come down.

HALPERIN: That's fun. Did you play those sports in high school too? Or, except for roofball.

DONAHUE: No, I didn't. I didn't play sports in high school. I wanted, I would have wanted to be on the wrestling team, but I couldn't beat Bill Hells. He made the team, and I didn't.

HALPERIN: Oh [Laughter]. How– and your fraternity was a big part of your Colby experience?

DONAHUE: Yeah. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. Fraternities were a big part of Colby. At that time, that was the only social life there was. [It] was all organized by the 10 fraternities.

HALPERIN: Interesting. And are you still close with a lot of your fraternity brothers?

DONAHUE: No, I've lost touch with them.

HALPERIN: Do you, do you think any men from your fraternity also went to Vietnam?

DONAHUE: Yes, I have a fraternity brother, Leslie Dickinson. He was in the Marine Corps as a second lieutenant as I was. He was killed over there.

HALPERIN: Oh wow.

DONAHUE: There were four graduates of Colby that were killed in Vietnam. He was one of them. He was two years behind me, I think.

HALPERIN: Wow. Did you continue, did you continue studying European history at Colby?

DONAHUE: Oh, yeah.

HALPERIN: Did you write a thesis?

DONAHUE: No, we had comprehensive examinations.

HALPERIN: Oh!

DONAHUE: “Comps.”

HALPERIN: That's different [Laughter].

DONAHUE: Well, it was a, you know, it was scary. You had to pass the comps in order to graduate. And I think, I think two people from our class flunked.

HALPERIN: Oh, they have to retake a year?

DONAHUE: Well, they had to wait a year to take it again.

HALPERIN: So did you focus in on any part of European history specifically?

DONAHUE: Yeah, [I] tended, tended to be England and Scotland and Ireland and France.

HALPERIN: Interesting!

DONAHUE: I didn't pay the attention that I should to Eastern Europe. I wish I had.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] So would you say that you spent a lot more time focusing on, maybe, like, social endeavors?

DONAHUE: Yeah, I had, I was in the bottom 10th of my class. I'm sure my grad, my GPA on graduating, was 2.05. Pretty low.

HALPERIN: But, so what were you, during college what did you think you were going to do after college?

DONAHUE: I always wanted to be a lawyer. I just thought I would be a lawyer. And I was lucky to get into law school. I got into, I applied to several, I only got into one: Boston University. And the reason I got into that was because I had 96% percentile on the law boards.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: At that time, BU Law had been kind of a, just a Massachusetts school. They were just graduating kids that would pass the Mass Bar stay in Massachusetts. And, they wanted to expand and become a national school, which they have since have. So I think they thought they'd take a chance on me, a guy with low grades, but, you know, good law boards. So that's how I got in.

HALPERIN: That’s so interesting. So you were ready to get out of, like, the country, you wanted to be in the city– or that was just, I mean, it was the one school you got in to?

DONAHUE: No. I really liked, I like Maine.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: And I like upstate Maine.

HALPERIN: Yeah, that makes sense. So after you graduated from Colby, you were supposed to go to law school?

DONAHUE: Right. I was accepted at law school.

HALPERIN: Yes.

DONAHUE: And I was living at home. I was working for the Post Office Department of Washington, D.C., at their headquarters. The draft board made me take a physical, and I came back 1A– passed the physical– and then the draft board sent me a notice that I was to report for duty at some Army base. I went to the draft board in Bethesda, Maryland, Local Board No. 54, and told the lady there that I had been accepted to law school, and I was perfectly happy to serve my country, but I wanted to do it after law school, and I'd be more valuable to the country and so forth.

And she said, I remember, she was wearing this house dress, and she was smoking a cigarette, and she said, “Well, you'll have to fill out form number 4785 in triplicate and get it back here before four o'clock, you know, day after tomorrow.” And I said, well, okay, could I have a copy of form 4754. And she puts her cigarette out, she goes over to this row of file cabinets. They were wooden file cabinets, pulling out these drawers, looking for forms.

I could tell I pissed her off. So I tried to be nice, and I said, well, you know, what do you think my chances are with the board, you know, asking for a deferral, another student deferral. And she said, “Well, there's four people on the board, and they're all lawyers, and they all went into the service before they went to law school. And the fourth one is me, and I can tell you how I'm gonna vote right now.”

HALPERIN: Oh my!

DONAHUE: So I told her, it's okay. Don't bother getting the form, and I went to a Marine recruiter that day.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: And I signed up for the Marine Corps.

HALPERIN: Oh my gosh. So did you– I guess that makes a lot of sense why they probably would not have granted you a deferment.

DONAHUE: Well, it should have. I mean, most, most people going to graduate school got student deferments. Donald Trump got them, but Local Board No. 54 was kind of famous for being hard.

HALPERIN: Wow. Were you disappointed at that?

DONAHUE: Oh yeah, I was disappointed. I remember coming up, I went to a Marine recruiter. I wanted to be an officer. He said, “Well, I can't sign you up as an officer. You got to go to an officer, selection officer in Washington, D.C.”

And he called the guy up. I remember he said, “I got a hot one here, Captain.”

So I drove to this hotel in Washington, D.C., where this selection officer had an office, and he had there were two rooms, and we talked for a little while, and then he said, “Well, you have to take a test.” And he gave me this test, and it was quite a long test, over an hour, with a lot of math on it. He said, “You sit there in that chair and you do the test, and I'll be in the other room.” He comes out of the other room, said “Time's up. Give me your paper.” And so I gave him my paper, and he walks in [to the other room], leaves me alone. I'm just sitting there while he grades it. And he comes out and he said, “Well, you passed.” And I said, “What was my score?” Said, “I can't tell you. All I can say is you passed.”

And we talked a little bit more about when I was going to go into Officer Candidate School. And he had me sign a contract committing to serve in the Marine Corps for six years, three of which would be on active duty, three of which would be in reserves. And then he swore me in– gave me an oath– swore me in.

So then I drove home, and when my parents came home from work that night, they said, “Well, how to go with the draft board?” And I said, “I'm a Marine.”

HALPERIN: Were they surprised?

DONAHUE: They were surprised and disappointed. My mother later said to my father, Tom [Thomas H. Donahue], “If Bill gets killed over there, I'm gonna die a bitter old woman.”

HALPERIN: Yeah. How did your sister feel? Was she there?

DONAHUE: No, no, she wasn't there. She was in Boston. She was going to school at Brown to get a master's in teaching.

HALPERIN: Oh, wow. Interesting. Why did you choose the Marines?

DONAHUE: You know, I guess I thought that if I was going to have to go in, I wanted to see what war was about. And I read, you know, Ernest Hemingway, and wanted to kind of test myself, and the Marines were definitely the most active service in Vietnam at that time, throughout the whole war.

HALPERIN: So you weren't, you weren't scared of it. You thought it was–

DONAHUE: Well, yeah, I didn't know enough to be scared.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] What did you know about Vietnam at the time?

DONAHUE: Not much. I hadn't followed it much. Johnson, President [Lyndon B.] Johnson, was calling up troops. He had a big increase in troops, and he did that through the draft. I remember before he did it, there was some speculation that he was going to call up reserves and leave us civilians alone and not draft us. But no, he did it through the draft. So then I kind of started paying attention.

HALPERIN: Yeah, did you– but you think your family and the people around you didn't really know much of what was happening in Vietnam?

DONAHUE: No, I think my mother, she stayed right on top of things–

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: –worldwide. So she knew, she had nothing good to say about the war, ever.

HALPERIN: Yeah, which is why she was probably the most scared when you said that you were going into the Marines.

DONAHUE: Yep.

HALPERIN: That makes sense. Do you think your dad was a little bit proud?

DONAHUE: Yes, I think he was, yeah.

HALPERIN: Did you have any other family who ever was in the military?

DONAHUE: Not close that I recall, no.

HALPERIN: How soon after did you leave for Officer Candidate School?

DONAHUE: What's that?

HALPERIN How soon after did you leave for Officer Candidate School?

DONAHUE: It was in January of 1967, and I must have signed up in about September of ‘66. So Officer Candidate School lasted 10 weeks, till mid March. And after that, you got a little break, and then you went to the basic school where you were taught how to be an infantry officer. So there were 500 of us second lieutenants going through that school, and we were divided into 10 platoons of 50 second lieutenants each.

My platoon was [inaudible]. And of those 50, 15 would go on Flight School in Pensacola, Florida. One would go to motor transport, two would go to

artillery, 32 would go to infantry, and of the 32 that went into the infantry, eight were killed. 16 were wounded.

HALPERIN: Eight people or eight–

DONAHUE: Eight people were killed. 25% of my platoon that went in infantry didn't come back. Half of them, 16 were wounded. And there were eight, including me, that were not wounded.

HALPERIN: Got lucky. What was Officer Candidate School like?

DONAHUE: Oh, it was like boot camp. We didn't call him a drill instructor, we called him a platoon sergeant. But he was, he was, he was something, and–

HALPERIN: [Laughter] And it was grueling, it just got you into shape.

DONAHUE: Yeah, it was really a tool to weed out those that didn't have gumption to make it.

HALPERIN: Mentally or physically?

DONAHUE: Both. Yeah, I'll give you a well, maybe I shouldn't.

HALPERIN: It's okay.

DONAHUE: Can I swear?

HALPERIN: Yeah, of course.

DONAHUE: I remember we had lockers, and you were supposed to have your locker arranged in just such a way with this uniform here and that uniform there, and your boots here, and so forth. And I had a craving for chocolate when I was at Officer Candidate School, and I would buy Hershey's bars, Hershey's almond bars, and our platoon sergeant had an inspection of our lockers– a surprise inspection– of our lockers one day. And he opened up my locker and he found my stash of chocolate, and he said, "Oh shit, Donahue, you suck me off with a bilge pump. Pogey bait!"

Pogey bait was the Marine Corps word for candy. But anyway. I can't remember my punishment. I probably had to do a lot of sit ups. I don't– or push-ups.

HALPERIN: But that couldn't have been the worst thing that they saw on there, right? That must have been a pretty–

DONAHUE: Yeah, I don't know. Got him, certainly got him upset.

HALPERIN: Did you ever do anything else to get in trouble there?

DONAHUE: No, I didn't. He didn't like me much until about the third or fourth week, when we went to the obstacle course. And I was just– I did great on the obstacle course. I got 100% every time I ran it.

HALPERIN: Wow!

DONAHUE: If you ran it through once, you had to do it in 60 seconds. If you ran it through twice, you had to do it in three minutes. And then we had teams where the platoons would compete against each other, and I was on the team representing our platoon on the obstacle course. And after that, my platoon sergeant treated me a lot better.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] That's nice. When people would leave Officer Candidate School and they would get weeded out, would they choose to leave, or would they be asked to leave?

DONAHUE: You know, I think you were just out of the Marine Corps with a honorable discharge for medical reasons or something, I can't remember. I only remember one candidate that didn't make it– there were some that got injured and didn't make it– but I remember one candidate, a little guy, we were fighting with pugil sticks to assimilate a bayonet fight, and you'd wear a football helmet, and then you'd fight with pugil sticks. And I remember two guys would do it, and the rest of the platoon [would] stand around watching, and you'd wait your turn. It was this guy's turn, and his opponent struck him in the face, and a front tooth popped out.

HALPERIN: Oh my.

DONAHUE: Anyway, he didn't graduate with us.

HALPERIN: Did this school make you excited for Vietnam, or give you doubts or regrets?

DONAHUE: Well, Officer Candidate School, not so much, but the basic school, yeah. I mean, I thought I was ready for– ready to take over platoon and go out into combat.

HALPERIN: How is basic school different? Basic training.

DONAHUE: Basic school, they try to teach you stuff. Officer Candidate School, they just wore you down.

HALPERIN: Oh, okay.

DONAHUE: But basic schools was really– yeah, you got a good education.

HALPERIN: About Vietnam?

DONAHUE: No, about the infantry, about– we got to fire every weapon that you can imagine. We got to, you know, repel off of tall buildings, you know, all kinds of stuff.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] Did you feel like most of what you learned there was applied when you went to Vietnam?

DONAHUE: Some of it was, that's for sure. All of the tactics we learned, how to set in an ambush, and how to set it in the defensive perimeter, and where to locate your machine guns, and how to call in artillery, that kind of thing.

HALPERIN: Was there a lot of camaraderie between the men? Were you allowed to become friends?

DONAHUE: Oh, yeah. And we did, yeah, yeah yeah. We did.

HALPERIN: Did they try for you guys to all become friends and really trust each other?

DONAHUE: I think they probably did, yeah, yeah. I had two close friends going through basic school, and we would go home to my house in Bethesda, Maryland– my parents' house–every Saturday.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: It was only– it was less than an hour's drive from Quantico, Virginia. It was Dave Cutler and Bob Wright. Bob Wright had graduated from Berkeley. His parents were very wealthy. They lived in a mansion on the same block that then Governor Ronald Reagan lived on.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: They had this beautiful apartment condo– I guess you say– in San Francisco, overlooking the bay, which was decorated completely in the white. White carpet, white chairs.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: Anyway, Bob and I became very close. I saw him– he was an infantry officer too– I saw him in Da Nang, the night that the Tet Offensive started, January 31, and we left. We were there for– the division was putting on a leadership school for something like 20 officers. And after that school was

over and Tet was underway, we parted company, and he was killed outside of Hue. A couple or three weeks later–

HALPERIN: During the Tet Offensive?

DONAHUE: Yeah, during the Tet Offensive, he got shrapnel in from a mortar in the back of his skull. And David Cutler– he was also infantry officer– he had been captain of the Colby football team.

HALPERIN: Oh!

DONAHUE: He was a rugged guy. But he got in a firefight outside of Khe Sanh, I can't remember, in the summer of ’68, and he was badly wounded. He was wounded- the firefight was so heavy, they called in a helicopter to MEDEVAC [medical evacuation] him, and his platoon sergeant was also wounded badly, and the helicopter couldn't make it because the landing zone was swept to fire. So he had to spend the night– he and his, he had two squads out there– had to spend the night on the ground, hoping that the North Vietnamese patrol wouldn't stumble over him.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: The executive officer of the company rounded up five people, I guess, to go search for him at night: a medical doctor– he would have been Navy– two corpsmen– they would have been Navy– and then two riflemen. So I think his name was Place. Lieutenant Place takes this group out just in the dark, searching for him. And they found him about five o'clock in the morning, and they called in a MEDEVAC, and the MEDEVAC was able to accomplish its mission. And David was taken to the hospital ship Repose [USS Repose], and then he was taken to hospital at Yokohama, Japan. Then he was taken to Great Lakes Naval Hospital. And it took him months, couple– three months– to recover, but he did recover fully.

And his dad ran a newspaper in Duxbury, Massachusetts, and David loved the newspaper business. He always said he had newspaper ink in his veins, and he bought– he started the Marshfield Mariner. Sold it. Bought a bunch of other newspapers. So when he died, which was in 2010 of cancer, he was quite a wealthy man. Married four times. I introduced him to his second wife, and I was the best man at his third marriage.

HALPERIN: Wow!

DONAHUE: So we stayed in touch.

HALPERIN: How did you hear about all of, or he must have told you about all of–

DONAHUE: He told, yeah– I got his story from him. But for Bob Wright, I had to, I was just asking anybody that was in his battalion what they knew about his death and the firefight and stuff.

HALPERIN: And you, you asked when you got back to America?

DONAHUE: No, over there. Anybody that I would run into that was in his battalion.

HALPERIN: So you were, were you often in contact with other battalions?

DONAHUE: No, but you know, you'd see– so at that time I was in the, I was working at, with the military police in Da Nang. And you know, convoys would come through, and they'd come through with, you know, troops for different outfits.

HALPERIN: Okay, just back to where we were before, just to clarify– where was Officer Candidate School?

DONAHUE: Quantico, Virginia.

HALPERIN: Okay.

DONAHUE: And the basic school was in Quantico Virginia.

HALPERIN: All right.

DONAHUE: Yep. And it's just about a half an hour, 45 minutes, south of Washington, D.C.

HALPERIN: Okay. So interesting. Did either of them ever teach about Vietnamese culture or customs?

DONAHUE: No. There were special schools for that, but no.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] Would that have been helpful?

DONAHUE: It would have been. Yes, it would have been helpful. The language is very difficult. You know, it's a sing song language.

HALPERIN: Yeah, interesting. Did they keep you updated on current events or–

DONAHUE: No.

HALPERIN: Oh, wow.

DONAHUE: No. We hardly knew what was going on. We were separated from news reports. We would hear Martin Luther King [Jr.] has been shot and killed. What? President Johnson is not going to run for re-election. What? Robert Kennedy has been shot and killed. What? They're riots in Watts [CA]. What? The Democratic Convention had riots. What? You know, we couldn't understand. Had no– we were taken by surprise by a lot of events.

HALPERIN: But this was all throughout the war, you were–

DONAHUE: It was all throughout my time in Vietnam.

HALPERIN: Wow. So then, how did you learn about these events?

DONAHUE: Well, the Martin Luther King thing was just– you couldn't keep that quiet. My mother used to try to send me little clippings from the Washington Post, and so I kind of tried to keep abreast of things, but it was hard, and times were really changing a lot. There were lots of protests against the war, and especially on college campuses. And that really took off in spades after I got to Vietnam, and continued right throughout until they stopped the draft.

HALPERIN: After basic training, you went straight to Vietnam?

DONAHUE: Mm-hmm.

HALPERIN: Were you excited? Were you nervous on the plane over?

DONAHUE: I was very nervous, yeah.

HALPERIN: And by that point, you had known the men in your platoon?

DONAHUE: That I took over?

HALPERIN: Or when you were arriving to Vietnam, was it the same group of men that you were with in training?

DONAHUE: No, no, no, all different.

HALPERIN: Oh, wow.

DONAHUE: Yeah, we would– we didn't go straight to Vietnam from the United States. We went to Okinawa first for, I don't know, a week or something like that, store things– we had to get a bunch of shots. And we would meet returning Marines, you know, they're coming back from Vietnam, and we'd pick their brain and find out what it was like.

HALPERIN: What did they tell you?

DONAHUE: I remember talking to one guy, and he said that you don't– or when you get over there, you'll doubt that you know what to do. But, you know, when the time comes, you'll know what to do. They taught you well. And he told me of a incident– he was leading a frontal assault on a enemy unit. And when you cross the line, it's do or die.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: And he'd given the order, then everybody stood up and crossed the line. One of his Marines bolted and ran to the rear. He took his pistol out, shot him in the back.

HALPERIN: My goodness.

DONAHUE: And he told me about that. And then they successfully, you know, killed all the people that they were attacking. So the lieutenant goes back to check on his wounded, and he sees this guy lying on the ground, and the guy complained that "You shot me in the back." And he said, "That's right, and if people tell anybody we're going to have you court-martialed for cowardice." And so nothing happened.

HALPERIN: Oh, my goodness. And that I'm sure made you even more nervous?

DONAHUE: Well, yeah, yes. I mean, that's what you're taught to do. When it's do or die, you can't let your men run off.

HALPERIN: Yeah. Wow, oh my gosh. So when you landed in Vietnam, what were your first impressions?

DONAHUE: Well, that it was very hot. But the landing, we landed in Da Nang. We were on commercial flights.

HALPERIN: Oh! [Laughter]

DONAHUE: And the flight before, just before, it was about a two-hour flight from Okinawa to Da Nang. Just before we started our approach to make the landing, they were called. The pilot was called off because the air base had received a couple of mortar rounds, and so they had to, you know, make sure that the air was safe.

HALPERIN: Oh my gosh. And then from the plane you met your group of men after?

DONAHUE: No. From the plane, we were taken to division headquarters.

HALPERIN: Okay.

DONAHUE: And we had to read a couple of– we had to read general orders that had been assembled in three ring notebooks. There were a couple of three ring notebooks with all these orders in there, and you had to read them. And then sign that you'd read them.

HALPERIN: And then when did you get out onto the–

DONAHUE: Into the field? Well, it took about a week, and I don't really know why. It rained very hard. We lieutenants were all– so these were the second lieutenants that had just been assigned to this division. From there you went to your regiment, from there you went to your battalion.

HALPERIN: Yes.

DONAHUE: And we couldn't get out of Da Nang. And I remember the monsoons coming down. You couldn't believe that it would rain that hard. We spent a bunch of time playing poker, we tried to find out why motor transport wasn't taking us there. Anyway, we finally– I can't remember. Might have been another transport outfit that took us. But anyway, I went to Quang Tri to be with the regiment, 1st Marine Regiment. The commanding officer was a guy named Colonel Ing, I-N-G, and I liked him a lot. And then he sent me to the 2nd battalion of the 1st Marine Regiment, which was very near Quang Tri. That was commanded by a lieutenant colonel, I'll forget his name, but he'd won a Congressional Medal of Honor in Korea.

And just before we got there, the battalion, I guess it was the whole battalion, came back from an operation, place called Highline Forest that was really just full of VC [Viet Cong]. And on their way back, one platoon got ambushed, and everybody in it was killed– about 30 people. So, you know, that was kind of my intro. Here's your [referring to interviewer's pencil]–

HALPERIN: Oh my goodness.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Wow. Just to clarify, was the headquarters in Da Nang, was that the same one that you were at when you learned about the Tet Offensive starting?

DONAHUE: Yes, yeah, same one.

HALPERIN: So there's just one like US headquarters in Vietnam?

DONAHUE: Well, so the Marines have– the biggest official grouping in the Marine Corps is a division, and there were two divisions in Vietnam. There was the 1st division, which I was in, and then there was a 3rd division, which David Cutler was in. And after division you got– there's a regiment. So there's three regiments to a division, and next step down is battalion. And there are three battalions to a regiment, and the next step down beyond that is a company. And for some reason, there's four companies to a battalion, and then you have a platoon. Beyond that, there's three platoons to a company, and then you have three squads to a platoon, three fire teams to a squad, and, you know, three riflemen to a fire team.

HALPERIN: Thank you. So then, as an infantry officer in the beginning, which were you head of?

DONAHUE: A platoon. Yeah.

HALPERIN: Okay. How many men is that?

DONAHUE: Well, yeah, it wasn't just riflemen. They'd give you a couple of machine guns, so that there's two to a machine gun, and then you'd have rockets. We had these things called LAWs: Light Anti-armor Weapons. And a squad of rockets was another three men. And besides the rifleman, you'd have– I had a radioman, and my squad leaders had radiomen. Radios were– you wore them on your back. They weighed about 25 pounds.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Big whip antenna.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: When I'd go out in the field, I would have maybe 35-40 men.

HALPERIN: Okay. Wow.

DONAHUE: When we were moved up to Da Nang they wanted to make sure that we were all TO strength, table of organization strength. And I think I had almost 70 men under my command.

HALPERIN: Wow. How did you control all of them?

DONAHUE: Well, you know, you do it through your subordinates.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: Through your squad leaders.

HALPERIN: I guess so. And then as an infantry officer, how was your role very different than someone who is on the lowest level– what were your duties and responsibilities?

DONAHUE: Well, as an infantry officer, we were supposed to go out on patrol, search and destroy the enemy. That's what we were supposed to do. And no matter what other MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] you had, whatever job you had, whether it was artillery or armor, tanks or motor transport or whatever. It wasn't going out on the ground, boots on the ground, looking for a fight. That's what we did.

HALPERIN: And that's all they told you. They just said, like kill them?

DONAHUE: Yeah, that's what you were supposed to do. Yeah, we had– my company commander, a guy named Captain Copeland, was very gungy. That means belligerent. You know, he wanted to kill Cong. Kill Cong.

HALPERIN: Wow. How did you feel about that?

DONAHUE: Sure. I mean, I was ready to–

HALPERIN: just do it.

DONAHUE: Do it, yeah. They're trying to kill us, so.

HALPERIN: Yeah, that's true. Um, did some people in your battalion feel almost like hesitant to kill the VC or you wouldn't be there if you–

DONAHUE: No. Nobody had any sympathy for the VC. Some of them were scared. I had a trooper who shot himself in the foot with a 0.45 caliber pistol to get out of the field.

HALPERIN: Oh my goodness.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: How did you deal with him after?

DONAHUE: I can't remember. He should have been court-martialed, but I can't remember being asked about it. And I was never called to testify or anything, so I don't know.

HALPERIN: So, you weren't the one disciplining them, it was the court martial?

DONAHUE: Yeah. I mean, I would have just reported that to my captain, who would have reported it to his battalion commander, and they would have taken some immediate action. I'm sure he was taken to the hospital.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: A field hospital. It’s no good.

HALPERIN: Wow. You mentioned that there was a South Vietnamese lieutenant who you really liked. Did your battalion work closely with South Vietnamese battalions?

DONAHUE: No, the battalion didn't. When I was in the MPs [Military Police] in Phu Bai, we did quite a lot of work with South Vietnamese soldiers and police.

HALPERIN: Did you ever think that that was strange– that you weren't working so closely with them, at least in the beginning?

DONAHUE: No, I didn't.

HALPERIN: So first you were in Quang Tri.

DONAHUE: Yes.

HALPERIN: And there's– where were you specifically in the province? Con Thien?

DONAHUE: I was in– there's a city in Quang Tri which is in Quang Tri province. Quang Tri province is the furthest northerly province in South Vietnam. And then north of that, at the very right on the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone], is Con Thien. That's in Quang Tri province. And so I was in Quang Tri for, I can't remember, two months, in Con Thien for maybe three months, and then I [traveled] down south to Phu Bai–

HALPERIN: Okay.

DONAHUE: –to be in the military police.

HALPERIN: All right, so in in Quang Tri–

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Okay, interesting. I didn't realize that you– okay. And then, so when you were in Quang Tri, why did you then switch to Con Thien?

DONAHUE: We were just ordered to go to Con Thien. At that time, it was the hottest spot in Vietnam. There was, it was surrounded by the North Vietnamese

Army. They had a lot of artillery. They had it sited right in and Marines were supposed to be there only for -- A battalion occupied Con Thien, and that battalion was supposed to get rotated out every 30 days.

HALPERIN: Oh.

DONAHUE: So we replaced 1/1, 1st battalion, 1st Marines, and we were thinking we'd only be there for 30 days. And then the Tet Offensive happened, and that just kind of broke everything wide open, and so we stayed beyond that.

HALPERIN: Why was it such a hot spot?

DONAHUE: The view from Con Thien was incredible. On a clear day, you could just see everything. You could see– I can't remember if you could see south to Dong Ha, but almost. But, if you control that area, you really had a great vantage point. So, it was militarily– it was significant. There also was something called the trace. May I have a piece of paper? [At this point, Donahue sketches the layout between the DMZ and Con Thien.] So here's the DMZ.

HALPERIN: Yes.

DONAHUE: There's a river that flows through it. We were not allowed to go across the DMZ. Here's Con Thien. [Donahue marked Con Thien just below the DMZ, on the eastern side of Vietnam.]

HALPERIN: Yes.

DONAHUE: Here is Gio Linh, I think it was called. [Donahue marked Gio Linh even closer to Vietnam’s eastern coast than Con Thien, and just below the DMZ.]

And here's the South China Sea. [Donahue marked the South China Sea on the eastern coast of Vietnam.] It’s about eight miles. [Referring to the distance from Con Thien to the South China Sea.] And the Marines took bulldozers and scrapers and whatnot and just cut everything away in their path. It was like a fairway on a golf course.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: And they would fly three– I think there was C-130s– three airplanes over it about every two weeks to spray Agent Orange to keep the vegetation down.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: Then there was Cam Lo here. [Donahue marked Cam Lo just underneath Con Thien, and on a similar longitude to Con Thien.] And then there was Dong Ha here, which is a big base. [Donahue marked Dong Ha just underneath Gio Linh, about on the same longitude to Gio Linh, and a similar latitude to Cam Lo. On the paper, a rectangle was nearly formed between these four places: Con Thien as the top left corner, Gio Linh as the top right, Dong Ha as the bottom right, and Cam Lo as the bottom left.]

And this area was called Leatherneck Square, and there was a lot of fighting that went on there, and a lot of Marines got killed in that area. [Donahue marked Leatherneck Square in the middle of these four previous sites, in the middle of the "rectangle."]

HALPERIN: But you were in Leatherneck Square, or you were only in Con Thien?

DONAHUE: Well, we once– the only big firefight I was ever in– we once went out down the trace. Two companies went down the trace. [Pointed the line directly between Con Thien and Gio Linh: the trace.] And we were supposed to go up this way. And then it was called a reconnaissance-in-force, were supposed to, you know, find the enemy and do them in. Anyway, we found them all right, and they shot us up pretty bad. I was at the last part of the event going out, but the people up here [here being near Gio Linh] got shot up bad. And they MEDEVACed up through Con Thien, you know, behind us.

HALPERIN: Wow. So it sounds like it was less of the guerrilla fighting that you normally hear about in Vietnam.

DONAHUE: No, we– this was not guerilla at all. This was all World War II stuff.

HALPERIN: Yeah. Did you think you would have preferred the World War II stuff?

DONAHUE: I don't know.

HALPERIN: Because at least maybe you expected it.

DONAHUE: Yeah, I guess that's right, but it was pretty intense.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: Can I show you– I have, I brought along one souvenir that I have.

HALPERIN: Sure!

DONAHUE: Let me find it.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: This is a bowl that some North Vietnamese soldier would have used to eat his rice out of. [Bowl is scratched up and small– the diameter of the top is about four inches.]

HALPERIN: Wow!

DONAHUE: He would have carried, you know, rice in a intestine or something, and he'd, you know, cook it up, try to find something to flavor it.

HALPERIN: My goodness.

DONAHUE: And, let's see.

HALPERIN: Is it just–

DONAHUE: This says Haiphong, wow. So there's a harbor just east of Hanoi, and that's Haiphong, and this was stamped Haiphong Harbor.

HALPERIN: Wow. How did you get this?

DONAHUE: I think Operation Lancaster. Let me just– oh, I know where it is. See that little hole?

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: The guy that was carrying this, the soldier that was carrying it, would tie a string through that, yeah, and put it on his belt. And that's–

HALPERIN: Wow, that's so interesting.

DONAHUE: So anyway, we were, I think was Operation Lancaster. That was, it was when I was stationed at–

HALPERIN: Was it–

DONAHUE: Help me.

HALPERIN: Uh [Laughter]. Was it–

DONAHUE: Quang Tri! When we say Quang Tri, there was a big operation that took our battalion and several other battalions and just moved up here [Donahue pointed toward the DMZ on his sketch] – another one of these reconnaissance-in-forces, supposed to flush the North Vietnamese out, get 'em into a big firefight, and kill 'em all. Didn't work.

But anyway, we got up there, and before we got up, just before we were got up there, B-52s would drop bombs on the area. These were called Arc Light strikes. And we found, the North Vietnamese– I think the thing that scared them the most were these Arc Light strikes. I think a B-52 carried something like 110 bombs. And I think those bombs each weighed, I can't remember whether it's 500 pounds or 250 pounds, but they just, you know–

HALPERIN: Oh my–

DONAHUE: –drop through the air, and all of them around here [still pointing to the sketch, close to the DMZ], the North Vietnamese, built bunkers, very sturdy bunkers. And we went to one of these bunkers that had been abandoned in a hurry, and somebody left this behind, so I picked it up.

HALPERIN: Wow. Did you take any other souvenirs back?

DONAHUE: Not really. I have a– I think I told you about a close call I had with a grenade?

HALPERIN: No, I don't think so.

DONAHUE: I'll tell you about that. But anyway, I bought– after I got back from Vietnam, several years after I got back– I bought an inert M-26 grenade to show people what happened to me. Okay, so I didn't tell you about this? I'll tell you about this. This is December 3, 1967. I call December 3, my lucky day.

HALPERIN: Okay!

DONAHUE: So we were, I was leading a platoon. We were south of the battalion base by 10 miles or 12, something like that.

HALPERIN: Where was the battalion base at this time?

DONAHUE: Quang Tri. So here's Quang Tri [points to sketch], and we went to a ville here, which is on the banks of a river. And on the other side of that river was Highland Forest, which was the place that the VC owned, and they shot, they ambushed our platoon in our battalion the day before I got to the platoon. I mean, everybody was scared of Highland Forest.
So we went to Highland forest, and there was a trail right along the river, and we were walking up the trail, and in a little pen was a water buffalo. And the water buffalo, they became fidgety and irate and uncontrollable when Americans were around. They were completely docile. You know, I've seen little Vietnamese kids lie on their back, and I've seen them, you

know, from a distance, plow rice paddy fields, but you get close– but when a, you know, a white man or a Black man gets close to him, they just go crazy.

This buffalo burst out of there and turned up here and came charging up the trail. And my radioman was always behind me. [Inaudible] yelled, “Lieutenant, watch out!” And I looked over my shoulder, and here's this beast bearing down on me. And as he is about to pass me by– he lunges at me just like this, with his head, he's got these big horns– and I kind of swiveled my hips like that. [Donahue stood up and performed the motion of swiveling his hips.]

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: And I'm not kidding, it was less than an inch– he missed me. And I ordered my men, “Shoot that buffalo!” And for some reason, the buffalo made a sharp turn to the left, and he was shot by one of my squad leaders. Falls to the ground. We go up to check to make sure he's dead. He's dead. Some villager comes up, a guy in his 50s, I guess, spouting Vietnamese and it's clear to me that it was his buffalo. And, you know, he's lost, it's a big loss. And he wasn't angry or anything– he was like a supplicant.

So I radioed back to my, to Captain Copeland, back to the battalion. “What should I do?” He said, “Well, bring the guy back. Come on back. Bring the guy back.” So we start this 10 or 12 mile hike back. And there are a lot of rice paddies around here, and I had my troops walk through the water instead of on the dikes, because I was afraid the dikes would be– yeah, booby trapped. And this guy was trying to get me– begging me– “Go on the dike. Go on the dike. Go on the dike.”

Anyway. Then, so we came–

HALPERIN: Wait, wait– he was begging you to go on the land?

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Oh my gosh.

DONAHUE: Yeah. At any rate–

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: –there's another incident here, but I'll finish this story. We get him back to the base. We have him squat down, tie his hands behind his back, put an empty sandbag over his head, and then leave him for S2, the intelligence

guys, to take care of it. Anyway, the intelligence guys did everything right. They paid him for the water buffalo, and about a week later, Captain Copeland told me that on the basis of what this buffalo owner told them, they went down to that same village and seized a cache of VC weapons–

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: –that he told them about. Okay, but that's, but before we get there–

HALPERIN: He was just a normal villager?

DONAHUE: Yeah. Just a normal villager. Before we get there, we had to cross another river, and there had been a bridge over that river, but the bridge had been blown up, and all that was left were these H-bars, H-beams. So it was like walking a tight rope to get across. And because I was good at the obstacle course and considered myself something of a gymnast, I would always lead the men over. I was take point, lead them over. And then I say, “Come on. Hurry up. Come on.”

So I did that, and I'm waiting here, beckoning the men to come over. And one of my men, a Black guy that I liked a lot, machine gunner– his name was McCargo– pointed down and said, “Lieutenant!” And then he started running, and everybody up beyond him started moving fast. And I turned around, and I looked, and there was a grenade. I was standing right over a grenade.

HALPERIN: In the middle of your feet?

DONAHUE: And, yeah. Yeah.

HALPERIN: It wasn’t buried?

DONAHUE: No, no. What they’d done, so– I’ll see if I can draw it.

HALPERIN: And just to clarify, what was this man's name?

DONAHUE: It was McCargo.

HALPERIN: What was his full name? Just for the record.

DONAHUE: Don't know. Don’t remember. Yeah, would

HALPERIN: Oh really?

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Would you guys just always call each other by the last names?

DONAHUE: Yep. Okay, so this is a grenade. [Donahue began sketching out a grenade on paper.]

HALPERIN: Yes.

DONAHUE: This is the thing that starts the fuse. If you were to unscrew it via– the fuse would be down here. This is what's called the spoon. And as long as the spoon is there in place, the grenades not going to go off.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: But if you pull this ring, there's a cotter pin here, and you pull it all out, then the only thing that's keeping that spoon from flying off the– [keeps the] grenade from exploding, is you're holding the spoon. So when you throw the grenade, the spoon flies, and two to five seconds later, the grenade will go off.

So what some enterprising VC had done, was he had held the spoon and he'd taken out the pin. And in place of the pin, he placed a vine stretching across the trail, and that's– and I could see the vine. I mean–

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: So either I or somebody coming across had kicked the vine out of the grenade, but for some reason, it didn't go off.

HALPERIN: Oh my goodness!

DONAHUE: So I'm looking over it like that. I picked it up, walked over to the river, threw it. The spoon flew. Grenade goes on the water and it explodes. So, two close calls: one was the buffalo and one was the grenade.

HALPERIN: So is this kind of an example of what people say when they mean that the Vietnamese really used their environment?

DONAHUE: Oh yeah, yeah. They did.

HALPERIN: Wow. How else did you see that?

DONAHUE: What's that?

HALPERIN: How else did you see that?

DONAHUE: What do you mean how else?

HALPERIN: Like, how else do you think they used their land to fight?

DONAHUE: Oh, well, they–God, we had very substantial wooden boxes that artillery shells would come in. They'd be thrown away. The Vietnamese would take those boxes and build huts out of them, hutches out of them. They would even take a heavy cardboard and, you know, use it as a building material. We had, back at the battalion, everybody lived– not everybody– there were lots of big tents, and the tents were held up by big poles, and the poles would have a piece of iron around them in the middle. If the VC could get a hold of those poles, they'd cut them off here, chip out all the wood down here, and use that as a barrel for a homemade mortar.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: You know, they just, there was a time–

HALPERIN: Very resourceful.

DONAHUE: What was that?

HALPERIN: Very resourceful?

DONAHUE: Yeah, well, there was a time when the Marines switched over from M-14 rifles to M-16 rifles, and the M-16 uses a different kind of ammunition. So the Marines had all these M-14 ammo lying around, you know, like thousands and thousands of rounds. And what they did when they– this was south of Da Nang, I think– what the Marines did when they left that area, was they had boulders come in. The combat engineers [were] gonna dig [a] big, deep hole, and dump those thousands and thousands of rounds into the hole, and then cover it all up. And when we came back, when the Marines came back, I don't know, a month later, they found out that the hole was completely uncovered, and all the rounds have been taken out.

HALPERIN: During the water buffalo incident–

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: The man who–

DONAHUE: owned it, yeah.

HALPERIN: The man who owned it– he was just a normal villager, but he knew where the grenades were?

DONAHUE: Yeah, yeah.

HALPERIN: So did a lot of villagers– were they, like, secretly working with the VC?

DONAHUE: I don't you know. I think most of the villagers were sympathetic with the VC. This guy wasn't, for some reason. I guess having paid him a good price for his lost animal helped. But, you know.

HALPERIN: Yeah, that's interesting. So then, when your goal was to just kill all the VC, how did you necessarily know who was the VC?

DONAHUE: Well, you didn't. I mean, you didn't kill anybody unless they were shooting at you.

HALPERIN: Yeah, that's true. That makes sense.

DONAHUE: Although, so when I was in the MPs, I was ordered to drive up to Hue, to make what was called solatium payment to families of, who'd had their sons shot and killed by Marines. There was apparently a squad of Marines that did a Lieutenant Calley kind of a thing, just murdered.

HALPERIN: What does that mean?

DONAHUE: What's that?

HALPERIN: Lieutenant Calley?

DONAHUE: I'll tell you. I'll tell you about that in just a minute.

HALPERIN: Okay.

DONAHUE: But they just murdered for no reason. And the American government, to kind of try to make amends, gave the families money, which was delivered in a white, which I delivered in a white envelope.

HALPERIN: Was it US dollars?

DONAHUE: No, it would have been piastres. In fact, it was illegal, was against the law to carry US dollars in Vietnam.

HALPERIN: Oh.

DONAHUE: You had to have what was called Military Payment Currency [MPC]. There was kind of a black market. Piastres were not worth as much as MPC, and there's this black market in that. Anyway, I made this, you know, I went to Hue and made these solatium payments. And that was tough.

Okay, so, Lieutenant Calley [William Laws Calley Jr.]– this made national news. He was an Army lieutenant, and he went into a village, and he ordered his men to open fire on the villagers and killed– I don't know how many– and some army helicopter pilot saw what was going on. And he landed the plane, or he landed his helicopter, and, I guess, stopped it somehow. Calley was prosecuted, court martialed, and found guilty. I can't remember what his sentence was, but President [Richard Milhous] Nixon, shortly thereafter–I don't think he gave him a pardon, but he gave him a reprieve, you know, commuted his sentence, something like that.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Yeah, Professor [Edward] Miller will know about Lieutenant Calley.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] I'm sure he will. So when the Tet Offensive began, you were at the–

DONAHUE: I was at Da Nang.

HALPERIN: You were at the leadership camp. Were you sent to that leadership camp during the Tet holiday because the Americans assumed it would be a break in the fighting?

DONAHUE: I don't know why I was sent there. Yeah, I don't know.

HALPERIN: But, I mean, were there for other holidays? Were there breaks?

DONAHUE: During Christmas there was a cease fire. Both sides decided not to shoot at each other, and the North Vietnamese used that opportunity to bring a lot of ammunition south, so that they could fire on Con Thien the day it was over. So we could see the trucks coming down to deliver the ammo– we couldn’t do anything about it.

HALPERIN: So in that case, were you totally surprised that they had done something during this holiday?

DONAHUE: No.

HALPERIN: Wow, that's interesting. And would the fighting stop for any other reason? Like, I know you said when you arrived in Vietnam, you waited for weekend in Da Nang because it was raining? Like, what–

DONAHUE: Well, I don't know why. What was that? That wasn't, no, that wasn't because of the rain.

HALPERIN: Oh. [Laughter] It just happened to be–

DONAHUE: Yeah, I don't know why these folks didn't want to transport us, but they didn't.

HALPERIN: But so the right, so the fighting wouldn't stop, no matter what the weather conditions were or anything?

DONAHUE: What's that?

HALPERIN: The fighting wouldn't stop?

DONAHUE: No, no. Wouldn't stop. No, no.

HALPERIN: So then when the Tet Offensive began, do you remember what you and the other men you were with thought?

DONAHUE: Well, we didn't know what was happening. We thought it was a– we thought it was a big offensive. In fact, the second lieutenants that were ordered to go to the leadership school, including me and Bob Wright, there must have been 18 others, something like that. We were ordered to stand lines, actually, to, you know, go into foxholes with rifles in case the North Vietnamese should get so far as to–

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: –to come to division headquarters. I mean, that's how nervous people were.

HALPERIN: Wow. So is that about when you realized that the Tet Offensive was quite different than other offensives?

DONAHUE: Yeah, yeah.

HALPERIN: Wow. So Bob Wright was really with you a lot, even though he wasn't in your–

DONAHUE: Well, he was with me for that period of time. There were three or four days, yeah.

HALPERIN: How did the fighting during the Tet Offensive feel– did it feel different than other times of fighting?

DONAHUE: Yeah, it felt like it was not just a guerilla war anymore.

HALPERIN: Yeah, and, but–

DONAHUE: You know, they took over the American Embassy in Saigon. You knew that?

HALPERIN: Yeah. But, so after it began, you went back to Con Thien–

DONAHUE: Yes, but on arriving at Con Thien, I was notified that I was going to be transferred to the military police.

HALPERIN: Oh, during the Tet Offensive?

DONAHUE: Yeah, well, yeah. So– and did that transfer happen immediately?

DONAHUE: Pretty soon, yeah, it was difficult to get transportation. It wasn't like they had a, you know, a Jeep already to take you there. You had to, kind of work your way south. And I didn't go to Phu Bai initially, I went to Da Nang. The MPs at Da Nang. And then a week or two later I went to Phu Bai.

HALPERIN: Do you know why you got transferred?

DONAHUE: I don't. I think, I do know that there were a lot of second lieutenants coming into the battalion, and they had to do something with them and all of us– a new second lieutenant got a platoon. He was gonna– it wasn't like they put him off someplace else– you don't know nothing.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: You know, it's sink or swim. And yeah, I think they were just, the battalion was just flowing with, overflowing with second lieutenants, and they had to get rid of them. And I guess that the MPs needed them.

HALPERIN: When you were in Con Tien during the Tet Offensive–

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: The VC gained a lot of land, but did they take over Con Thien?

DONAHUE: No, no, they didn't take over Con Thien. No.

HALPERIN: So, okay. So was there a lot of fighting around Con Thien?

DONAHUE: Yes, in the Leatherneck Square.

HALPERIN: Okay, interesting. But the only place that they really stood for a while was Hue?

DONAHUE: The only place that– Yes, I think that's right.

HALPERIN: Okay, and so when you went to the military police, how was that different?

DONAHUE: Oh, it's completely different.

HALPERIN: Really?

DONAHUE: Yeah. We didn't– it was a much easier job. I had at Phu Bai, we lived in quarters that were built for us by the Seabees. I had my own room. I had a cot, I had a pillow, blankets.

HALPERIN: Oh my gosh, luxury!

DONAHUE: Yeah luxury, right, right, right, right.

HALPERIN: Hotel!

DONAHUE: In fact, I had a I had a Vietnamese cleaning woman–

HALPERIN: Oh my gosh.

DONAHUE: She'd do my laundry,

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: That's wow.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Aside from the living situation, how was your responsibility?

DONAHUE: Well, so here's Vietnam. [Donahue began sketching again.] Here's the South China Sea. This is Saigon. [Donahue marked Saigon on the south of the nation, and in the middle of the nation horizontally.] This is Da Nang. [Donahue marked Da Nang, north of Saigon, near the DMZ, and next to the sea.] There's Con Thien. [Donahue marked Con Thien a little northwest of Da Nang, even closer to the DMZ than Da Nang.]

There's a road that goes right up north, kind of along the coast from Saigon, and it keeps going into North Vietnam, called Route 1. And that's really the only way you can get trucks, goods transported north and south.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: So it was our job in the MPs to keep Route 1 open, and to make sure it wasn't being used by Viet Cong.

HALPERIN: Oh okay.

DONAHUE: So it wasn't like, you know, we arrested people because they were AWOL. We didn't make arrests, you know,

HALPERIN: Yeah. How did you know that it was a Viet Cong truck?

DONAHUE: Well, the Vietnamese people had to have IDs– identification. And we would set up roadblocks and check for identification.

HALPERIN: Oh, you would stop all of them?

DONAHUE: Yeah, and there were bridges along, and then the bridges would be guarded by Marines from some unit. But we would always put two MPs at each bridge to check going north and south.

HALPERIN: Wow. So it wasn't really active combat.

DONAHUE: No, no, it wasn't. I'll tell you, but I'll tell you one interesting story about the bridge. So at this time, I guess I was the acting operations officer, and a gunnery sergeant who I quite liked, made a trip to inspect the bridges that we were monitoring. And he came back and said, “The security is woefully lax. The Marines are just kind of partying with the other people on the bridge.” You know, they're just letting their guard down.

HALPERIN: Partying?

DONAHUE: Well, it's not partying. It's just, you know, you're not paying attention.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: And the VC pick up on that. I mean, if you're, you know, ready to defend yourself, they're not gonna attack. But if you're going to sleep, they'll attack.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: So I wanted to relieve all the Marines that day, and I was working out who I'd send here and there and everywhere, and I wasn't able to do it on the day that I wanted to. I had to wait until the next day. But that night, there was one bridge, and the VC attack that bridge, and they killed all of the

Marines from the unit that was guarding it. That would be about a squad, about 10 and 12 people, but the two MPs survived. One survived by playing dead. Somebody had thrown– a VC had thrown a grenade into the bunker, killed a bunch of people. Didn't kill our Marine, but he wallowed in the blood of the others and played dead. Viet Cong stuck his head in to make sure everybody was dead. The other Marine jumped into the river with a reed and breathed through a reed–

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: –until he felt it was safe enough to come out. So I would have felt really bad if either MP had been killed because I should have gotten them relieved earlier.

HALPERIN: Did you ever– so just to clarify this, that was an attack that happened because some of the MPs weren't fully checking, or they weren't fully paying attention?

DONAHUE: Yes, and not only the MPs, but the Marines that they were working with, the Marines that had responsibility for security of the bridge. And I think that they probably were, you know, well, I don't know if they were checking the way they should. But I do know that a gunnery sergeant thought that the security was very lax. All up and down. They just weren't paying attention, and that's what happened.

HALPERIN: Did you ever have to go to any of these measures to stay alive, like–

DONAHUE: No, no, no.

HALPERIN: So, you just stayed alive, just like skill and luck. You didn't have to be clever, like that.

DONAHUE: Luck, yeah.

HALPERIN: That makes sense. And when you were surveying this road, and you would find someone on the VC, what would you do to them?

DONAHUE: You know, I don't, I don't know. I can't remember.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] And so this was when you were in Phu Bai?

DONAHUE: Right.

HALPERIN: But you were also a part of the MPs in Da Nang?

DONAHUE: Yeah. So the way that happened– so here's Da Nang, and here's Phu Bai. [Donahue began sketching on paper again.]

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: Let's see if I can explain this. This was a headquarters for the 1st Marine Division, and Phu Bai had been headquarters for the 3rd Marine Division, but the 3rd Marine Division got orders to relocate itself up in Dong Ha–

HALPERIN: Okay.

DONAHUE: –so the 1st Marine Division divided itself in half, and half went to Phu Bai under what was called Task Force X-Ray. And Task Force X-Ray had to have a military police company. This was, so a two-star general was in charge of the division, and a one-star general, his executive officer, was in charge of Task Force X-Ray. So a bunch of Marines, 100– a bunch of MPs– 100 or so, got sent from Da Nang to Phu Bai, and I was among those.

HALPERIN: Did you prefer being an infantry officer or in the MPs?

DONAHUE: Yeah, I wanted to go back to the infantry, yeah.

HALPERIN: Wow! Even though the MPs it was–

DONAHUE: Yeah, but yeah.

HALPERIN: Wow, that's so– so you did you, I mean, maybe enjoy is the wrong word, but it was like satisfying to do the job of an infantry officer?

DONAHUE: Yeah, I felt like I wasn't pulling my weight.

HALPERIN: Mm-hmm.

DONAHUE: The way I felt.

HALPERIN: Like you weren't doing as much as you could have done?

DONAHUE: Right?

HALPERIN: That makes sense. While you were in the MPs or the infantry, did you ever see or notice some things that made you question why America was in Vietnam or–

DONAHUE: Oh, yeah.

HALPERIN: Really? What kinds of things?

DONAHUE: Well, I had one troop die while I was in command of 1st Platoon. His name was Dobbs. I think I sent you this chapter. And after that death, I just thought, this war is not worth it.

HALPERIN: Mm-hmm. That makes sense. And how did your battalion or your platoon deal with so many men passing away?

DONAHUE: Well, it's hard. I mean, it's just really hard.

HALPERIN: Were there any like things that you would do in their honor? Or–

DONAHUE: I don't remember that, you know, you see an M-16 stuck in the ground with the bayonet on and the helmet over. I don't remember anything like that.

HALPERIN: And did you have to do the solatium payments often?

DONAHUE: No, I think, I think it was just that one occasion.

HALPERIN: And why was it you if you didn't–

DONAHUE: I don’t know. I mean, they wanted to the– The civilian Vietnamese they respected police and they respected military police. And I think it had more gravitas if a military police officer delivered the money than just having some run of the mill officer deliver the money.

HALPERIN: You said before that you felt like most of the Vietnamese villagers were for the Viet Cong.

DONAHUE: Yes.

HALPERIN: Did you expect that coming in?

DONAHUE: No, and it didn't take me long to realize that. I mean, you drive around in a truck and you get these dirty looks from the villagers, and you know, you could tell that they weren't friends.

HALPERIN: And most of them knew where the land mines were?

DONAHUE: I think they did. And it's more than that, because, like, they'd be little spies. You'd have these kids come into the battalion area, supposedly selling candles. And I'm quite sure that many of those kids were just coming back and saying, you know, that piece of artillery equipment is located, you know, there.

HALPERIN: Oh.

DONAHUE: And, you know, going back and telling the Viet Cong–

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: -what's what.

HALPERIN: Would you have expected someone to tell you that the villagers were not on your side at first, or that was just something you all figured out?

DONAHUE: We just figured that out. I want to tell you about the candles, though.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: So when I was at the a– God, I can't remember names anymore. When I was first with my platoon, we slept in what were called shelter halves. They're little kind of pup tents. My pup, the person I shared the tent with, was my platoon sergeant, Sergeant Page. And when it got dark, for light and for heat, when it was cold, we would use candles. And there were candles that thick around and maybe that high.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Yeah. And you know, kids would come into the battalion and try to sell you candles.

HALPERIN: And was that most of the interactions that you had with the Vietnamese?

DONAHUE: If you went out, I think this happened more when I was an MP than in the infantry. But if you would go out, you would be on a street. If you're any kind of a populated area, you'd be surrounded by kids, prepubescent boys, and they would want cigarettes, they'd want candy. They'd want to pimp their sister. You know, they'd want to sell you Dinky Dao cigarettes, marijuana cigarettes.

HALPERIN: They wanted to sell you those things, or they wanted them?

DONAHUE: No, they wanted to sell you Dinky Dao cigarettes. And "Hey, Marine, you want a boom-boom my sister?"

HALPERIN: Wow. So they just almost saw the American GIs as like, a place where they could profit?

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Did they ever think about, like– oh, I mean, I guess if they [Vietnamese villagers] weren't really for the VC then, or if they weren't for the VC, then they wouldn't think these [American] soldiers are, you know, helping, like, liberate my country from communism.

DONAHUE: No.

HALPERIN: None of the Vietnamese really were thankful for the GIs at all.

DONAHUE: Right.

HALPERIN: So then, did it ever feel like you were just fighting the war for America and not for the Vietnamese people?

DONAHUE: I felt like I was fighting the war mostly to stay alive and to keep my men alive.

HALPERIN: Yeah, yeah, makes sense. Did you often think about the overarching goals of the war– you were, I mean, if you were in the war–

DONAHUE: I didn't.

HALPERIN: Yeah, you were just focused on staying alive.

DONAHUE: Right.

HALPERIN: That makes sense. And when you were in Phu Bai, you were right next to the A Shau Valley?

DONAHUE: I don't think so. I can't remember. I thought A Shau Valley was south and kind of towards Da Nang, but, I don't know. I mean, I've heard of A Shau Valley, but I don't know where it is.

HALPERIN: Alright. [Laughter] Well, I just wanted to check. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated while you were in Vietnam.

DONAHUE: Yeah, yeah.

HALPERIN: And you all heard about that through newspaper clippings?

DONAHUE: I can't remember how we heard about it, but I think I sent you a chapter on that.

HALPERIN: Yes.

DONAHUE: I'll tell you about it. So this was when I was at Phu Bai.

HALPERIN: Yes.

DONAHUE: And we had a Lieutenant Peterson who was senior to me, and was, I think he was acting Provost Marshal, or, you know, acting Commander of the Military Police Company at that time. And he was a thorough racial bigot. He was a nice guy other than that, but he was a thorough racial bigot.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: And upon getting that news, I think it was in the morning and late morning, he stopped work for everybody. And the officers and the senior enlisted men repaired to a room that we called the Officers Club, and broke out beer to celebrate. And you should know that this room, the whole building, was made by the Seabees. And the side, the walls, were not solid. They were made of louvers so that air could circulate.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: But you could also hear.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: Right. And Peterson went on a tyrant: “Thank God that nigger’s dead,” you know, “Well, there's another dead nigger.” And I remember trying to explain to him– I remember telling him, you know, I could adopt a Black child and raise him as my own, and by the time he graduated high school, he'd be just as intelligent, just as confident, capable as any of his white classmates. And I remember Peterson saying, looking at me and saying, “Well, maybe you could, but a nigger couldn't.”

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: And I left after that, didn't stay around drinking for the rest of the day, which Peterson did. And then, along come nightfall, I was called in. Peterson wanted to see me, and he'd been told that the Blacks in the MP company were restless, and he was worried that they were gonna–

HALPERIN: Revolt?

DONAHUE: Shoot, yeah, shoot the place up, because they were mad about the celebration of King's death. So Peterson asked me– and this, we must have had 50 or 60 black Marines– Peterson wanted me to talk to them. So I sent orders that–

HALPERIN: Since he knew that you were like, not racist, and they might like you better?

DONAHUE: Yeah, they like me better, yeah. So–

HALPERIN: Were you the only one who wasn't that racist, who was white?

DONAHUE: I think there might have been some others–

HALPERIN: But you were outspoken.

DONAHUE: But at time, I think I was the only one. Anyway, I had all the brothers– we called them brothers– come into a big room that was kind of used for storage, and I remember it had just a cement floor. And we all sat around the perimeter of the room, facing inboard. I was in the middle. And I could just, there was just tremendous anger. And I remember taking my rank insignia off, my lieutenants bars off, and putting them in my pocket, because I didn't want to be the heavy. And I just had people, I said that I remember telling them it was a terrible day, and this is the worst assassination since Abraham Lincoln got killed. And I said, you know, I think that what we had to do was try to carry on King's work of nonviolent, you know.

HALPERIN: Protest?

DONAHUE: Yeah. And then I had people speak, and, you know, it's just an outpouring of anger.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Some of the troops, you know, teared up and cried. But anyway, when it was over, the temperature among the Black troops had gone down, and there was no riot. I think that, you know, I think there might very well have been a riot. I don't know that there were riots in Phu Bai upon hearing of King's death, but there certainly were in other Marine Corps areas in the United States.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: You know, and you've got these guys, and they got guns, and they got grenades, and it could have been really unpleasant.

HALPERIN: After you had the talk with all of these–

DONAHUE: The Blacks?

HALPERIN: Yeah, did you feel almost proud that you had been able to, like, make an impact on them? Or you just felt like you were, like, making it right?

DONAHUE: I felt relieved.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: That's what I felt.

HALPERIN: That makes sense. And was it odd to hear something about America when you were so, like, detached from it?

DONAHUE: I don't know if it's odd–

HALPERIN: Or not odd. Was it like, I guess surprising is the wrong word. But, you didn't really hear about many other events or that might have been the biggest event that you heard about while you were in Vietnam?

DONAHUE: Yeah, yeah, I think so. And I want to tell you, the day after King, the day after I had the talk with the Black troops, I had to go down Route 1 in a jeep. And the Jeep was driven– I was riding shotgun– the jeep was driven by a Black trooper.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: And every Black that we passed, my driver and the Black that we passed would look at each other, kind of in solidarity or in brotherhood. This grief that they were sharing, that I was not a part of.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: But, yeah.

HALPERIN: Were there other racial tensions at other times when you were in Vietnam?

DONAHUE: Not too bad. When I was head of the 1st platoon, it was about equal– even whites and Blacks, and they pretty much hung out together. The whites hung out together, the Blacks hung out together. But it wasn't a rivalry. And there was kind of, I remember that the Blacks called the whites honkies, and the whites called the Blacks splib dudes. Those could have

been really nasty terms, but they weren't delivered that way. And I think that's because everybody knew that, you know, you had to fight together.

HALPERIN: Bigger fish to fry.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: And you also mentioned that it wasn't just white people that Blacks were getting some racism from. It was the Vietnamese as well?

DONAHUE: Oh yeah, the Vietnamese very clearly thought that the Blacks were a lesser racial group, and the Blacks just couldn't tolerate being treated that way.

HALPERIN: How did they fight back?

DONAHUE: Well, I remember breaking up a fight. A couple of Black guys were just pummeling a Vietnamese, and I broke it up, and I didn't report them. You know, I'm sure that he'd done something to set him off. And then I had another trooper– I think I sent you this chapter. And another trooper, a Black MP who had beaten, badly beaten, a Vietnamese policeman or MP, and he was brought up for discipline in front of the Lieutenant Colonel.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: Anyway, there was this hearing, and fortunately, the Colonel didn't do anything to him.

HALPERIN: Just back to the Tet Offensive for one more question.

DONAHUE: Yup, okay.

HALPERIN: Since the Tet Offensive had such a big impact on America–

DONAHUE: Yeah, it did.

HALPERIN: – once the Americans saw how like, gruesome the battle was, and that, you know, America really wasn't winning as much as the President was saying, were you aware of this growing mistrust?

DONAHUE: I wasn't really aware of anything until I got back from Vietnam, because, as I told you, we were shut off from news pretty much.

HALPERIN: Yeah. That’s so interesting. How did you feel about it when you learned about it?

DONAHUE: Well, when I got back, I thought that we should get out and just leave it to the South Vietnamese. That's what I thought. I did not join the vets against the war. Whatever it was that John Kerry–

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: Kerry's group did.

HALPERIN: Yeah, and you mentioned how mostly your personal goal in Vietnam was just stay alive, keep your men alive, yeah, but you preferred the infantry.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Why did you prefer the infantry if there was such a higher chance of getting killed?

DONAHUE: I just, I don't know, I don't know, but I really did try. I mean, I've got a couple of chapters on that.

HALPERIN: Oh, yeah. And you just mentioned how, like, what you were thinking when you left Vietnam, did you feel like you had unfinished business, or you were very ready to go back?

DONAHUE: Ah, well, if you want the truth of it.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: I was in love with the woman I'm married to now, Kate. And I would have proposed marriage to her if I hadn't gone to Vietnam right off. The reason I didn't propose marriage before I left, was [that] I wasn't sure I was going to come back, and I wasn't sure I was going to come back with all my arms and legs. So, I proposed to her the first time I saw her upon my return to the states. If she had said no, I was going to put in for another tour of six months, but become an artillery officer first.

HALPERIN: Wow, oh my goodness. So you really didn't have such a– interesting, like, that's just so interesting that would have considered going back.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Did you meet Kate at Colby?

DONAHUE: No. She went to Connecticut College with my twin sister, and they became friends, and we had a blind date, I guess, our junior year, and that didn't

really work out. And then the summer after we graduated, we met again at a party to celebrate the engagement of another friend from Connecticut.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: And I was just swept off my feet then.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] Did Kate notice a lot of differences in you when you came back from Vietnam?

DONAHUE: Some, for sure. I had severe back pain for several years after I came back, and I'm pretty sure that was a kind of a form of PTSD.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: But, I mean, it was so bad that I couldn't really climb stairs.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Yeah, had to sleep on the floor.

HALPERIN: You're doing pretty good on those stairs over there! But when you left Vietnam, you didn't go home, right? Or you went to–
well, I left Vietnam. We got it like 30 days leave.

HALPERIN: Okay. And then you went back to serve in North Carolina?

DONAHUE: That's right. Right.

HALPERIN: Yes.

DONAHUE: And in North Carolina, I was given another– so MOS means military occupational specialty, and it's what your job is. And my MOS was infantry officer, but then I got another one, which was nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare defense officer. And I had to go to a couple of schools to get that, but that kept me in Camp Lejeune. I didn't have to go on a med cruise, or–

HALPERIN: It was called Camp Lejeune?

DONAHUE: Well, actually, there's a little camp called Camp Geiger, which is right south of Camp Lejeune. That's where I was stationed. And then I was abruptly– and I got that job because I begged the captain, who was making the assignment, “Please don't send me on a med cruise, I'm getting married in February.” And he said, “Well, you know, I've got this billet here. It's a good one. I hate to give it up, but sounds like you could

use it. You'd have to go to school." [I] said "I'll take it. I'll take it." So that was easy duty, and I liked it, and I thought I did a good job.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: But then that captain was replaced by another captain who didn't want me to have it. He wanted to save it for somebody else. So I was sent to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, for five months.

HALPERIN: In Cuba?

DONAHUE: Gitmo.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Back to the infantry, yup.

HALPERIN: And that was after serving at this camp?

DONAHUE: Geiger. Yes, that's right,

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Yeah. So I finished up my Marine Corps career at Gitmo.

HALPERIN: What was the state of Cuba at this time? What year was this?

DONAHUE: This would have been '69.

HALPERIN: Okay.

DONAHUE: So Cuba has this big, beautiful bay, Guantanamo Bay, which is wonderful for big, heavy naval ships to anchor in and to hide in. And the United States had had that ever since, I guess, 1898, whenever the Spanish American War was. And we paid rent to whoever was running Cuba before Fidel Castro took over. And we continued to try to pay rent to Castro for it, but he wouldn't cash the checks, but we didn't give it up. And so, the Cubans have always claimed that we were there illegitimately, and, you know, took it over.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: But we said no. So anyway, yeah, that was Cuba and Gitmo. And Gitmo, there's this bay. There's the Caribbean Sea, and Gitmo has 17 miles of fence around it. [Donahue began drawing the layout of Gitmo on paper.] And there's a good part of the island which the Navy occupies, and they

have schools there, and they have their wives there. And there's the shitty part of the island which a battalion of Marines occupy. They don't have any amenities, no children, no wives, no nothing like that. And there are ocean-going ferries that will take you back and forth from one side of the island to the other.

HALPERIN: What did you do most of the time in Cuba if it wasn't active, since it wasn't active combat?

DONAHUE: Well, I was the Executive Officer of Headquarters and Service Company, which was just a paper pushing job, so that's what I did. Did a lot of drinking. We did a lot of drinking. On two occasions, we were called out– an alarm would ring, and we'd all take our battle stations all along the wire. And when we did that, the Cubans would too. So this would happen at night, and then, you know, as the sun rises, you'd be looking at the Cubans who were looking at you, and then everybody would go home. That happened on two occasions.

HALPERIN: But no shots were ever no shots were fired.

DONAHUE: No shots were fired, yeah.

HALPERIN: Interesting. So then once you got back from Cuba, you were done.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: How did you adjust back into civilian life? Or was it difficult?

DONAHUE: No, I was happy. I was happy to do it. You know, I was newly married, and Kate and I were very much in love, and it was all good.

HALPERIN: So you proposed within that 30 days span when you got back from Vietnam, before you went to North Carolina?

DONAHUE: Yeah. So the way– I'll tell you that how that happened.

HALPERIN: Yeah!

DONAHUE: I got back. I can't remember what day of the week, but like Monday. Well, we were flown from Okinawa to San Francisco on a commercial airline. And I remember the captain saying that– getting on the radio and telling everybody on board that we were going 50 miles an hour below the speed of sound. And he said, “This is the fastest I've ever flown.” We had something like a 200-mile-an-hour tail wind. And we got into San Francisco. We all had our seabags. And, you know, there's 200 or 250 Marines on board, and customs only had one line opened up.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: I grabbed my seabag and started walking, you know, these corridors. Down this empty corridor, and somebody at the end said, “You got to stop there. You can't go.” I said, “Listen, I'm going. You want to look at my bag. Look at my bag.” And so he started looking at this bag, but a bunch of other Marines– you know, I had opened up a new line. Anyway, I got in there. I got a red eye flight from San Francisco to Reagan, not Reagan airport, Dulles Airport, just outside Washington, D.C. My parents met me early that morning and drove me home.

I had another little problem. Besides having these back problems, I also had trouble swallowing. My grandmother, who lived with us, made my favorite breakfast. I can't remember what it was, but I had trouble swallowing it. She was upset at that. At any rate, I stayed home until two or three days. Kate was working in New York City. On that Friday, I drove up to New York City to see her. We were having drinks before dinner at a restaurant, at a bar, I guess, and I proposed marriage to her. And she didn't say yes, and she didn't say no. And I spent the rest of the weekend with her, not letting her out of my sight. And on that Sunday we were in Brookline, Massachusetts, she accepted my proposal.

HALPERIN: Wow! That’s amazing.

DONAHUE: After that, I went to North Carolina. I can't think of the name of these. Anyway, I went to Camp Lejeune, and I told the captain that I wanted to get married. He wanted to send me on med cruise. I said, “No, please, let me get married. I'm getting married in February.” And he said, “Okay, I'll give you this job.” So he gave me this job, so that's how that worked.

HALPERIN: Wow, amazing. And then you went to law school.

DONAHUE: Then I went to law school after that. Yeah.

HALPERIN: BU [Boston University] Law?

DONAHUE: BU Law, yep.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: Graduated from there in ‘73 and moved to Vermont the day of my graduation.

HALPERIN: Oh, why Vermont?

DONAHUE: Oh, that's where Kate's parents lived.

HALPERIN: Oh.

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Wow. And you were happy to go to Vermont?

DONAHUE: Oh yeah, I was happy to go to Vermont.

HALPERIN: I guess if you liked Maine, then Vermont– where in Vermont do you live?

DONAHUE: Hartland. Do you know where that is?

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: It's right below White River Junction.

HALPERIN: Yeah. Upper Valley. And you raised you like, raise your children there?

DONAHUE: Yep.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: We've got three boys, yeah.

HALPERIN: Oh my goodness.

DONAHUE: They're all good skiers.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] Do you like to ski?

DONAHUE: I'm not very good at it.

HALPERIN: Neither am I.

DONAHUE: Kate's pretty good. She's a little cowardly, but she's got good form.

HALPERIN: Yeah. As your boys were growing up, or really just in general, did you often share memories or stories about your time in Vietnam?

DONAHUE: No, I didn't. One of the reasons I started writing these memories is I thought that they ought to know about them.

HALPERIN: Yeah. And is that why you decided to write a memoir?

DONAHUE: I'm writing it for them,

HALPERIN: For your boys?

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Wow. And why now, do you think, and not 30 years ago?

DONAHUE: I don't know. I just, I never really talked about it. We were, I was, this is like, I guess it's before COVID. I was hunting elk in Idaho with two of my sons, Sam and James, and we were looking over this, we were kind of sat and looking over this stream and hill here. And I just remarked that it reminded me of a place in Quang Tri. And, you know, they didn't really know what I was talking about. And so I thought, yeah, I should tell them,

HALPERIN: Wow. They were never really curious. They didn't ask you much about it?

DONAHUE: If they did, I didn't say much. Yeah, I think they knew about the water buffalo incident.

HALPERIN: Yeah. Do you think you didn't really say much because you didn't want to scare them?

DONAHUE: No, I just, I think I wanted to forget it. Leave it behind.

HALPERIN: So then, right after you got back, though you weren't– so then when, just because what you said when you got back, you were considering going–

DONAHUE: Artillery, yeah.

HALPERIN: Going back again. But then, at that point, once you had sons, you just wanted to forget about it. At what point did your mind switch? And you–

DONAHUE: Don't know.

HALPERIN: But at some point it did?

DONAHUE: Yeah.

HALPERIN: Interesting. Do you know what potentially made you like have a different perspective on the whole experience.

DONAHUE: No, I don't know.

HALPERIN: So what do you think about it now?

DONAHUE: What do I think about my service in Vietnam?

HALPERIN: Yes.

DONAHUE: That's going to be the last chapter of my memoir. And I don't know–

HALPERIN: Is it written yet?

DONAHUE: No.

HALPERIN: This is gonna be the blueprint.

DONAHUE: Yeah, this will be the blueprint. You know, now that it's all over and done with, and I survived, I guess I'm glad I did it. But, you know, it was a bad war. We shouldn't have been there. And you know, my participation in it is really nothing to be proud of, but somehow I am proud of it.

HALPERIN: What parts are you most proud of?

DONAHUE: Serving with the men I served with.

HALPERIN: Yeah, that makes sense. Yeah, it sounds like you did do a lot of great things during [the war] where, like, the story that you told about when Martin Luther King Jr was assassinated, that's amazing.

DONAHUE: Yeah, yeah. I'm proud of that.

HALPERIN: But, when you were just leaving you, and even when you were in Vietnam, you didn't really think about if America should be in the war or not?

DONAHUE: No, I did. I thought we shouldn't be. Yeah, in fact, I wrote some letters to my father. My father thought that we should continue to prosecute the war. He thought that because America had made a commitment, it couldn't go back on a commitment no matter what. He voted for Richard Nixon in 1968 instead of Hubert Humphrey, because they thought Humphrey was too soft on the war.

And the week before Kate and I were married, we were married on February 15th of 1969, the week before that, I had come, yeah, I had come up from Camp Lejeune to spend that weekend with my parents. And we were at the dinner table, and Dad and I got into a shouting match about the war, about whether we should get out. And, yeah, it was bad. He was never in combat, and I accused him of not knowing what war was like.

HALPERIN: Yeah. That’s a fair point.

DONAHUE: And I left. I left the dinner table, went upstairs and packed my clothes, you know, without having fully eaten my meal, and got into the car, you know, and drove off. My mother was furious at my father. And, you know, but he was there at the wedding, acting as if nothing had happened.

HALPERIN: So if you thought that America shouldn't have really been in the war, then why did you want to go back as an artillery officer?

DONAHUE: I think I really wanted to punish North Vietnamese soldiers as much as I could, and I could do that in the artillery. Because, you know, I'd lost friends.

HALPERIN: Yeah.

DONAHUE: Not a very good reason.

HALPERIN: But that does make sense. When you were a lawyer, or just throughout the rest of your life, did you notice little parts of your experience in Vietnam impacting you?

DONAHUE: I don't know that I did. Yeah, I don't know that I did.

HALPERIN: Is there anything else you want to share? Any other stories?

DONAHUE: I'll just add a thought about why I wanted to be in the artillery. My great grandfather, Thomas Hart Benton Sands, was in the 10th Indiana Light Artillery Unit, and he was heavily involved in the Battle of Murfreesboro, it's also called the Battle of Stone River [during the American Civil War]. And his gun was blown up, but he was not, he was not injured.

HALPERIN: Wow.

DONAHUE: At any rate, I was thinking about artillery because of that.

HALPERIN: Because of that story. All right.

DONAHUE: Okay.

HALPERIN: So is that it? anything else?

DONAHUE: No, I mean–

HALPERIN: Thank you so, so much-

DONAHUE: Sure.

HALPERIN: - for letting me interview you. This was lovely.

DONAHUE: Well, thank you for doing it. I thought you did a good job, and I hope you get a good grade.

HALPERIN: [Laughter] Thank you!

[End of interview.]