

John M. Morton  
Dartmouth College Oral History Program  
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project  
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Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

GEISMAR: Today is Tuesday, August 11<sup>th</sup>. My name is Bradley [R.] Geismar, and I'm here in Rauner [Special Collections] Library on Dartmouth College campus in Hanover, New Hampshire. And today I'll be interviewing Mr. John [M.] Morton.

John, good afternoon.

MORTON: Hi.

GEISMAR: And thank you so much for coming out here to talk to me today. So to start off the interview, I was wondering if you could give us or give me a little bit of background information on your biography. We'll start with where were you born and when?

MORTON: Sure. I was born probably a little more than an hour south of here in Keene, New Hampshire. I grew up in Walpole, New Hampshire. From a fairly early age—I had the good fortune of living on the top of a hill that was kind of surrounded by cow pastures, and early on, I discovered I really enjoyed the outdoors and specifically skiing. But unfortunately, the little local school that I went to in Walpole had at the time two sports. They had basketball in the winter and baseball in the spring. And through junior high school I was really terrible at both of those.

But I loved to ski, and I was offered—someone in the town was a graduate of Tilton School, which had a ski team. And so he suggested I look into Tilton, and they actually had a scholarship program for students from northern New England here. So I applied, got a 50 percent scholarship, went to Tilton and participated on the ski team and loved it.

That gave me the opportunity to go to Middlebury [College]. I have to say that the adviser at Tilton said, "You really ought to look at Dartmouth," which I did because I knew Dartmouth also had an excellent ski team. But at the time, Dartmouth was all male, and I had just finished four years at an all-male

prep school, and it was clear to me I didn't want to go four more years to an all-male school. So Middlebury seemed like an excellent choice for me.

At the time, Middlebury was one of a number of—I should say I was born in 1946, and I graduated from Tilton in 1964, and at that time, Middlebury had compulsory ROTC for all male students. It was a land grant college, and all of the land grant colleges and universities in the country at the time—one of the agreements was that you would have ROTC, Reserve Officer [sic; Officers'] Training Corps.

At the time, I believe Dartmouth had Naval ROTC. Middlebury had Army ROTC. So we all—all of us male students were in ROTC, and we had drill every Thursday afternoon, where we would all get dressed up in our uniforms, and all of those students—our classmates that were against the war in Vietnam would protest while we were marching in formations.

At the end of sophomore year, we were given the opportunity to voluntarily stay in ROTC for our final two years or get out, and while many students got out—as I recall, many of my friends on the ski team took the attitude that, given at that point, 1966, Vietnam was definitely, you know, headline news almost every day. And the thinking was, “We are probably going to go one way or another, and it probably makes more sense to go as an officer rather than an enlisted man.” And in retrospect, that may not have been sound judgment, but nevertheless, many of us, or at least my friends decided to stay in ROTC.

About that time—and I had continued to ski and was doing reasonably well on the Middlebury ski team. And one of the highlights of every winter was coming over here to Dartmouth for the Dartmouth Winter Carnival, and in those days, it really was almost a nationally prominent event. One of the things that you could count on even as a skier from rival Middlebury would be that there would be a *New York Times* sports reporter—I think his name was Michael [E.] Strauss—who would be here covering the Dartmouth Winter Carnival and the various events.

In those days, there was a jump out on the golf course, and the whole—not just the student body but the whole community would turn out Saturday afternoon to watch the

final event of the skiing competition, so it was a big deal. And at the end of the carnival, they would have a lavish awards banquet in the Hopkins Center [for the Arts], the alumni hall there. And I still remember just what an impressive event that was. The president of the college, the dean of the college—the head table at the Winter Carnival banquet was a real Who’s Who of the administrators and, you know, influential professors at Dartmouth. It was very impressive.

GEISMAR: If you don’t mind me asking—

MORTON: Not a bit.

GEISMAR: That’s fantastic. You were mentioning earlier that coming to Dartmouth kind of presented an opportunity to—I guess to be seen by *New York Times* reporters or to maybe interact with people who would be telling the story about the ski events.

MORTON: Yeah, yeah.

GEISMAR: If you don’t mind me asking, was that—when you were in Middlebury, was skiing something that you were hoping to maybe to take beyond college? Was there kind of a drive of seeing those reporters and kind of getting your name—getting your name out there as a skier?

MORTON: Well, it wasn’t so much—to be honest, skiing, even at a place like Dartmouth, and Middlebury, did not have let’s say the cache of football or basketball or ice hockey, but at Middlebury and Dartmouth it was clearly more highly regarded than in many other colleges or universities, at least at the time.

And, you know, to answer your—the other question, when I started at Tilton in 1960, the Winter Olympics were in Squaw Valley, California, and one of the successful American skiers at that time was a woman named [Penelope T.] “Penny” Pitou, who came from Laconia, New Hampshire. And it was the first time that I think I had even registered anything about the Winter Olympics. Because it was in the USA, it was reasonably good coverage. I think Penny Pitou was on the cover of *LIFE* magazine, which was a big deal in those days. And she won a couple of silver medals. I mean, she was tremendous, phenomenal. And it was the first time that it kind of made the connection to me that not only, you know,

was there the Winter Olympics but somebody like me from a little town in New Hampshire could go and participate. I think before, I had always—if I was aware [of] the Olympics at all, I was under the impression that it was just mostly for Europeans or something. But here's a gal from Laconia, New Hampshire, who comes home with two Olympic medals. And it was all of a sudden, like, *Whoa! I'd like to do that.*

GEISMAR: Certainly.

MORTON: So anyway, at the time, my sophomore year at Middlebury, I decided to stay in ROTC. About the same time, just by total coincidence, the Middlebury team was competing in one of the first races of the season up in Lyndonville, Vermont, and there were all these athletes there with "USA" on their warm-ups, but I didn't recognize any of them. I didn't know who they were. And I had skied enough by that point, so I knew everybody on the U.S. cross-country team, and so at first I almost said, *Well, who are these imposters with "USA" on their jackets?* Because they weren't the cross-country skiers. I knew that. Well, it turned out that they were the biathlon team, and I hadn't—I didn't know anything about biathlon.

GEISMAR: So you skied—I'm trying to think—in downhill and cross-country at Tilton. Were there any other ski events that you competed in besides—not biathlon.

MORTON: In those days, it was pretty much understood in team skiing that you had to at least be willing to try all—what they referred to as all four events.

GEISMAR: Right, and those events were—sorry.

MORTON: And that would be downhill, slalom, jumping and cross-country. And through the years, there'd been a couple of changes in—oh, back sometime in the '60s there were a couple of tragic accidents involving downhill skiers, and the NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] decided to eliminate downhill and put in its place giant slalom, which they figured would be safer. And that probably was justifiable.

Unfortunately, in about 1980, actually while I was coaching at Dartmouth, the NCAA skiing committee made a decision to eliminate jumping, and I think—I've always thought that

was a very sort of selfish and short-sighted decision because that in turn undermined the jumping programs in high school all across the country, and it really was a disservice. And the reasons that the coaches who were involved did that were almost all very self-serving, for their own particular team's benefit.

But at any rate, that jumping then was replaced by a cross-country relay event, so then the current schedule includes giant slalom, slalom, a cross-country individual event and a cross-country relay.

But in the days that I can—even at Middlebury, I was expected to—you know, if they needed a fourth warm body to go off the jump, then oftentimes they'd say, "Morty, you're jumping today."

GEISMAR: Oh, boy!

MORTON: And I would say, "Okay." It would be a stretch to say, call what I did jumping. But I did have a couple of memorable days on the old Dartmouth jump, which were very uninspired, but I survived.

GEISMAR: [Chuckles.] Always the goal.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: Always the goal. And out of the four events that you competed in, did cross-country happen to be your favorite as well as one that you excelled at, or did you have one that you enjoyed more but maybe cross-country was something you were better at so you went along with that?

MORTON: You know, the answer to that I think is that the other events, at least at the let's say moderate to reasonably skilled level, really do require skill. I used to think, when I first got started, that I would probably be able to do downhill and jumping because I think most of them just evolved, you know, the guts to do it: go fast and try not to fall. But I eventually learned that all of those require skill. Slalom, a lot of skill.

But the one that you could get by on with just sort of determination and hard work—I mean, the general sense back when I was skiing was if you could train harder than anybody else, you could succeed. Technique wasn't all that

important. In retrospect, that's not entirely true. The people who excel internationally are very, very skilled and have a tremendous amount of finesse technically as well as being some of the best physical specimens on Earth. But I didn't know that at the time, and it actually served me pretty well, through college anyway, that I worked as hard as anybody else and so I had some success at it.

And filling in or fitting into that was that a lot of other skiers were not particularly interested in cross-country. You know, they would much prefer, you know, to ride up the hill rather than to ski up it.

GEISMAR: And you had some success, too,—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —at Middlebury, certainly, and I'm guessing at Tilton?

MORTON: Yeah, yeah.

GEISMAR: Can you walk me through a little bit of what your career skiing and being a student at Tilton was like and some of your later success at Middlebury?

MORTON: Yeah. Well, it was almost comical because, as I mentioned, just being aware of Penny Pitou coming from Laconia—which she ended up marrying the Austrian who was the downhill champion at Squaw Valley in 1960. His name was Egon Zimmerman [I], and Tilton hired him as a part-time coach. He'd come over a couple of days a week. And he was, in many ways, a typical Austrian. You know, didn't have what I would describe as a great sense of humor but was very well organized and very—he would tell you exactly what he thought. You know, "You ski like shit."

GEISMAR: [Chuckles.]

MORTON: And that would be his coaching comment for the day.

GEISMAR: [Chuckles.]

MORTON: But we all learned a lot from him. And I had a couple of opportunities where—in those days, I was still primarily focused on Alpine skiing, but we had the Eastern Prep School Championships at Middlebury one year, and the guy

that—I was still an underclassman. One of our better skiers hurt his ankle in the slalom, and so the coach said, “Who’s got size nine and a half feet?” And I happened to have that size, so he said, “You’re running cross-country in Becker’s place.” And I turned out—it turned out okay. You know, I did well, and I thought, *Ah, well, this wasn’t so bad*. And I saw that maybe I might even have more success in cross-country than I would in Alpine.

So that was the same basic situation at Middlebury. There was a legendary ski coach there named [Robert] “Bobo” Sheehan, who was a World War II vet, had been a naval carrier pilot. And he was also—he had a great sense of humor but was kind of a no-nonsense kind of guy. And in the first meeting of the Middlebury ski team my freshman year, the day classes started, all of the people who aspired to be on the Middlebury team were in one room, and there were a lot of well-known, highly-successful Alpine skiers. And as a freshman, I’m just kind of looking around, thinking, *Wow, this is sort of like an All-Star*—there were several that had been on the previous Olympic team and were coming back to finish up at Middlebury.

And Bobo started out by saying, “You freshman look around. As you can see, downhill skiers are a dime a dozen on this team. If you want to ski for Middlebury, you better learn how to ski cross-country.” And I thought, *Okay, that’s my chance*. So it worked out well for me.

And then learning, by the end of my sophomore year, about this biathlon program, which I’d never heard about, but I learned that the Army funded this small [Winter Biathlon] Training Center in Alaska to train about 20 athletes for biathlon, which I learned was a combination of cross-country skiing and rifle marksmanship and that they were actively recruiting promising, you know, candidates for the program. So, you know, I started putting two and two together, and I recognized—I graduated in the spring of ’68. If I chose to stay in the ROTC program, I would have normally a two-year military commitment, but about the same time, the ROTC program offered me a scholarship for my last two years at Middlebury, a full ride, all expenses. But that turned into, then, a four-year active duty obligation.

But I got thinking, well, four years would take me through the ’72 Olympics in Sapporo. Theoretically, I’d be assigned to

that training center for the four years, and I couldn't find a better place to train for the Olympics. And at that time, I wasn't especially fussy whether I made the Olympic team as a biathlete or a cross-country skier. And by that time, I realized I wasn't going to make it as an Alpine skier or a jumper.

So I communicated with the person at the time [who] was the secretary of the Army sports branch, and he was very reassuring every step of the way, and he advised me on, "Yes, absolutely, accept the scholarship." And then I had to, you know, select a branch of the service. And, as you may know, the Army has, like, I don't know, ten different branches. They have three combat arms: infantry, artillery and armor. Sometimes they consider the engineers as combat arms. But then there's finance, personnel, transportation, Chemical Corps, and the Special Services, which run all of the, like, gymnasiums and athletic facilities at Army posts all around the country. And I thought, *Great, I'll sign up for Special Services.*

But this guy who ran the sports branch said, "Oh, no, no. You want to be infantry because infantry has far more officers, and therefore they can much better afford to have one of them off in a special assignment like biathlon." And I thought—I had a little inkling of, *Boy, I don't know. I'm not sure I want to be an infantry officer.* But he was the guy who was going to be making the assignments, and I thought, *Okay.*

So anyway, to try to condense this story, I graduated from Middlebury. On the same day I got in my car and drove to [Fort] Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, where I had my ROTC summer camp, and from there I was assigned to Fort Benning, Georgia. I was in—as part of this whole deal, I was also designated as a Regular Army officer rather than a Reserve Army officer. And that meant, in the Army's, you know, perspective, that I wanted to make a career out of the military, which was not the case, but that RA commission came with the scholarship.

So I then was in this infantry officers' basic course that was filled with West Pointers [graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point], graduates of The Citadel [the Military College of South Carolina] and graduates of Virginia Military Institute. I think I was probably the only ROTC officer

in the whole cycle. And they were all gung-ho. Every single one of them—they had the same goal, and that was to be the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That was their life's mission.

And for many of them, the first step—well, the first step was, after they finished their infantry basic course, which was a piece of cake for them because they'd all learned this every summer at West Point or VMI, but they all wanted to become Airborne rangers, and then they wanted to go directly to Vietnam because they wanted combat time. They wanted to earn combat ribbons. They wanted a chance to demonstrate that they had what it took.

GEISMAR: Right. And that certainly wasn't your plan.

MORTON: No, no. And so, boy, I was definitely a fish out of water. I tried very hard to fit in and not to stand out, but it was a challenge because just sort of psychologically we were coming from just totally different places.

At the end of the course, which went fine—I didn't have any trouble passing the infantry basics course—and, in fact, I ended up doing better than many of my classmates because they were so blasé about it. I mean, many of them were, you know, drinking all night long. I mean, it was a just a big, long, whatever, nine-week party for them.

GEISMAR: Pard' me, but do you think that your education at Middlebury and kind of your background at a liberal arts college—do you think that that helped you went you went on to ROTC officer training? Or do you think was that perhaps a benefit in any way, or was it just kind of a different outlook?

MORTON: You know, I think it was a benefit from the standpoint that what I was learning, both in the classroom and in all of the tactical exercises that we did—it was all new to me, and so it was interesting. And it was exciting. I mean, still one of the I suppose most exciting or intense memories I have of any of the military training I had. They would put us in small groups, and then they would just arbitrarily say, "Okay, Cadet Morton, you are in charge." Or at that point, I had been commissioned, so I would have been a lieutenant. "Lt. Morton, you're in charge. This is your squad. The objective is that hill over there. But be advised, there have been enemy tanks spotted in the area."

So now you're supposed to use what you've learned in the classroom and say, *Okay, how do you spread out this squad and approach the objective, knowing that there might be enemy tanks in the area?* So, you know, you try to apply what you learned, and you know enough not to have your guys get out in the open, and you try to stay in the—keep them camouflaged in bushes and things like that.

And so we were approaching this objective, this hill, and I thought we were doing reasonably well. You know, we were getting fairly close, and I thought I had them spread out pretty well. And then all of a sudden, there is just this *roar* of an engine, and up out of this I guess—I don't know whether you call it a revetment or something, but a hole in the ground that they had dug for this tank—roars up, and all you see is the bottom of the tank and the main gun headed up into the air, and then the whole thing crashes down just immediately in front of us. I mean, the ground's shaking, and there's dirt and dust everywhere.

And the assistant instructor sort of pops out from behind a tree, and he says, "Nice goin', Lt. Morton. You got your whole squad wiped out." And I mean it was just—you're standing there in shock at the size and awesome power of this tank. But I paid attention during—

GEISMAR: It kind of grabbed your attention.

MORTON: Absolutely, yeah.

GEISMAR: And you were mentioning earlier that there was kind of a divide between where you were coming from, I guess with your backward, than where the other officers were coming from. Was there ever an issue, or did that kind of lead to difficulty interacting with other officers when you led a mission, for example? Did you notice any difference, then, when one of them may have been leading a mission, or was it pretty much the same?

MORTON: You know, in that sense, when we were actually involved in the classes and the exercises, I didn't notice anything, and I think partly it was because I was really paying attention and trying. They were—by and large, it was old hat to all of them. I mean, they probably knew what was going to happen in

that exercise because that exercise is probably duplicated on Army posts all across the country.

You know, there was—as it turns out, I was one of the first officers to arrive at Fort Benning for that particular cycle, so I had been assigned a room in this big brick barracks building called Olson Hall, and it was like a—it was a quadrangle, and in the center of the quadrangle there was parking places. And at about the time that I—I think my senior year in college, I bought a second-hand Volvo, 19- —what was it? I think it was, like, a '66 Volvo 122 Model. But it was in great shape. Not too many miles, and I kept great—I had a lot of pride in that car, and I took good care of it. It was all polished and looked great.

And so when I arrived at Olson Hall, I was one of the only cars in this parking lot. Then the West Pointers started arriving, and they have a tradition—and I don't know if it's all West Pointers or just the infantry officers, but there's a Chevrolet dealer somewhere near West Point that basically gives these young officers a deal, so they all buy Corvettes. And they must sell, you know, 150, maybe more, maybe 500 Corvettes every spring. And these guys—this is one of their traditions or whatever you'd call it, rights of passage, as they all buy a Corvette.

And so then these Corvettes started showing up as these guys arrived and moved into their quarters. And on the day of the first formation, as we're all lining up, this guy next to me—you know, we're all in alphabetical order, so his name is Morrissey or something like that. He says, "Are you Morton?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "You own that Volvo?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Well, you know, somebody mentioned that it looks kind of odd having all these Corvettes and that one little ugly Volvo." He said, "We'd like you to park it on the outside of the building."

GEISMAR: [Chuckles.]

MORTON: And I looked at him and said, "You've gotta be shittin' me." And he said, "No, not only am I not shitting you, but if you don't move it before tonight, we'll move it, and you probably won't find it again."

GEISMAR: So a little bit of tension there.

MORTON: So I moved it.

GEISMAR: Right.

MORTON: And I thought, *Okay, so this is typical of West Pointers*. And that's not fair to say because they are not all like that, and I've had encounters since then with some remarkable, you know, soldiers, warriors, you know, who were [voice cracks with emotion] tremendous people. But they have more than their share of assholes, too.

GEISMAR: Certainly.

MORTON: Yeah. So anyway, that was Fort Benning. I got through infantry officers' basic. We had a big assembly, and they said, "Congratulations, you are all going—you all have"—I think—"weekend leave. Then you're all going to Ranger school, and then you're all going to Airborne school, and then you're all going to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for six months, and then Vietnam." And they all thought it was great. They were all saying, you know, "Hoo-rah!"

And I said, "Whoa, not me. I'm goin' to Alaska to ski for the biathlon team." But I had to—all the people at Fort Benning were saying, "No, you're not. You're going. You're part of this cycle." So I had to—I actually took emergency leave, drove to Washington, D.C., went to Infantry Personnel, and luckily found a personnel officer there who said, "Well, do they want you in Alaska?" I said, "Absolutely. Call them." Get on—" The Army phone system as called the AUTOVON [Automatic Voice Network], and I said, "Get on the AUTOVON line. Ask for Major Hightower at the Biathlon Training Center." And fortunately they did want me. So, "How soon can he be up here?"

GEISMAR: Whew! That's—

MORTON: So I think I arrived in Alaska on November 5<sup>th</sup> in 1968. Everything went great for two years. I made the biathlon team, traveled all around Europe every winter, competed at the world championships and the military championships, and trained throughout the spring, summer and fall. I got back from my second European trip in the spring of 1970, and I just went in to check in at the office, the biathlon team office, and the office sergeant said, "Oh, sir, your orders

have come in.” And I said, “Orders? What orders?” He said, “Well, your orders for Vietnam.”

And I said, “What?” And sure enough, I had orders for Vietnam. And I said, “Boy, there’s gotta be some mistake. You know, I’m supposed to be here through the ’72 Olympics.” “Nope Due to equity in lieutenant assignments and career development”—I don’t know, scheduling or something like that—“Lt. Morton will proceed to—” And I was supposed to—I actually ended up flying to Vietnam space available on a flight from Elmendorf Air Force Base in Alaska to—and it landed in Saigon, in Tan Son Nhut [Air Base], and it was I think probably—I should remember the date exactly, but I think it might have been August of 1970.

And I still just vividly remember anybody—have you interviewed other Vietnam vets?

GEISMAR: You’d be my first, yeah.

MORTON: No. Okay. Well, I can almost guarantee you this: Every single vet that you interview is going to give you the same impression of arriving in Vietnam. And they open the—this was a memorable—it was a charter flight. There were so many guys going over that they couldn’t fly them all on military aircraft, so they would charter airlines. I forgot which airline, but I know it was a Stretch DC-8 [Douglas DC-8 Stretch]. I think they said they had something like 237—it was before they [Boeing] 747s.

GEISMAR: Mmm. Mm-hm, mm-hm.

MORTON: So it was just a, you know, regular one. I think they said 237 seats, all—this particular flight I think was all officers and senior noncommissioned officers. Many of them were going back for their second tours. And, you know, it was all—I got on in Anchorage, and we may have stopped in Japan to refuel, and we’re approaching Vietnam, and one of the things, memories you have is that—you know, conventional civilian air travel now—they’re very, you know, careful and deliberate in the takeoffs and landings, and depending on where you’re landing, you may have sort of a ten-minute, very gradual approach, right?

So I can remember that we’re—by the time we’re saying, “Well, we should be arriving pretty soon,” we’re beginning to

see, you know, green land instead of ocean below us. And then all of a sudden, you know, the airplane goes into almost this precipitous dive. And I'm thinking, *Whoa!* And I didn't know a single person on the plane. And I was, like, holding onto the armrests. And there was this major next to me, and he says, you know, something like, "Relax, Lieutenant," he said, "they bring us in on a steep descent so that the Viet Cong have less of an opportunity to try to shoot the plane." And I said, "Oh."

GEISMAR: Great news, yeah.

MORTON: "That's interesting, yeah." Then they level off and land. It's just a flare-out and you're on the ground, taxiing briefly, and then, since this was just a charter flight through a conventional commercial airline, all of these flight attendants are just sobbing their eyes out. You know, I remember seeing the mascara streaming down their cheeks, and they're just crying their eyes out. And the pilot comes on the intercom, and he says, "You guys take care of yourselves." [Voice cracks with emotion.] I'm sorry.

GEISMAR: No problem at all.

MORTON: [His voice is still quavering.] "We'll be back in 365 days to bring you home." And then these flight attendants are all, you know, hugging everybody. [His voice recovers.] You step out of the plane, and it's not the, you know, like the tunnels they have now. It's just onto a stairs that they roll up to the thing. And it was just like walking into an oven. It was almost—it was tactile, it was so hot. It was like—and the first thing you do is, like, [sharp intake of breath] because you just can't believe how hot and humid it is. Of course, it was compounded by the fact that the airplane was air conditioned and you'd been on it for 12 hours or something.

But I can remember walking down the stairs, and off to the left there's this chain-link fence, and at first I couldn't really make out what was behind the chain-link fence. It was just—and it sounds bizarre, but it almost looked to me like caged animals. At first, I was—*What the heck?* And then I realized it was guys, men, but with long, scraggly hair, and a lot of them had, like, big, cumbersome bracelets, and their clothing was all faded, almost white. And they didn't have any kind of, like, a uniform. And I'm looking at them, and finally it's connecting that *these are the guys that have survived a*

*year, and they're gonna get on this plane and go home as soon as we get off and that if I'm lucky and survive, that's what I'm gonna look like a year from now.*

And it was, like, *Oh, shit!* And about that time, these guys behind the fence—they're just almost like animals—they start singing, [He sings to the tune of "Camptown Races"] "You're goin' home in a body bag, doo-dah, doo-dah. You're goin' home in a body bag, yay doo-dah day." And I'm thinking, *These are our guys! These are the guys we're replacing.* And it's, like, *Holy smokes!* I mean, there's no way anybody could prepare you for—

You walk across the tarmac, get on a bus, and still, you know, the heat is just, you know, almost beyond explanation. And the bus has no glass windows in it, but it's got, like, like, wire mesh where the windows are. And so we all get on the bus, and somebody says to the—there was a U.S. soldier who was driving the bus. And somebody says, "What's with the wire mesh, trooper? Are you afraid we're gonna escape from the bus?" And the guy says, "No, sir, it's to try to keep the hand grenades from comin' in and blowin' you up on the way to the replacement station." And you could tell, you know, the guy was just tired. He was just—and he says—and everybody sort of says, "Oh. Okay."

So, you know, that's basically your introduction to—you're in country.

GEISMAR: Oh, my gosh. Well, so you've gone from kind of—from doing biathlons—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —and being—I'm going guess, and I'm going to ask: Would you say that your time in Alaska was maybe a time outside of, almost outside of being in the military, or was that still very much involved in the military? We can go to that, but—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: And then you're going from kind of that experience to this, you know, one heck of a welcome—

MORTON: Right.

- GEISMAR: —in the country. Do you mind going back and talking a little bit—would you say that your time—or can you describe your time—
- MORTON: Yeah.
- GEISMAR: —in Alaska beforehand, and was that a very different military experience than day one?
- MORTON: It was clearly very different from arriving in Vietnam.
- GEISMAR: Certainly. [Chuckles.]
- MORTON: Alaska was a little bit odd in that we were in a military unit, but it was a military unit that at the time, in that context, was not especially highly regarded because a lot of the, you know, the conventional military people at Fort Richardson, certainly all of the commanding officers—they felt that the main mission at that time was Vietnam, and anything that was a diversion from that or—and they oftentimes regarded us as, you know, these are just jocks who are trying to get to out of their real duty, which is fighting in Vietnam.
- Now, I mean, we didn't set the unit up. We were just taking advantage of a good situation. And a lot of them wouldn't necessarily acknowledge it because there's a lot of pride in the military about physical fitness and everything. But there virtually were no other people in the military that were at a physical level to do what we did every single day. I mean, you know, they can maybe do 50 pushups, and they can walk 15 miles with a full pack—and I don't mean to diminish any of that, but they can't—they could not, day after day after day, train the amount of—you know, it was not unusual for us to ski 40 kilometers a day, day after day after day. There just wasn't anybody in the military that wasn't there.
- GEISMAR: So the time that you spent in Alaska was more devoted, I guess, to training for competitions.
- MORTON: Absolutely. You bet.
- GEISMAR: Were you doing much training that would, I guess, keep you—kind of keep you up to—not up to scratch but keep you I guess in the military mindset, in the military mode—
- MORTON: No.

GEISMAR: —or was it more just for the competition?

MORTON: The main focus and function was training for the Olympics and military championships and the world championships, in biathlon. And it was almost comical because every so often we were required to do these sort of, I don't know, readiness tests, I guess. One of them, they had—in Alaska they had a winter warfare readiness test, where everybody—all the units were supposed to go out and spend three days and two nights out in the wilderness, away from—you're basically in tents. They had what they called Yukon stoves. And for most of the soldiers and for all of the office personnel, that was—they dreaded that. They found every way they could to get out of it. They were all on sick leave, and they took leave during that so they weren't available, but for us it was kind of a lark. It was almost kind of fun because it was three days where we weren't training with the intensity that we normally do.

On one of those, we said, "Hey, let's just to kind of piss 'em off, let's not even bother setting up the tent. You know, we can build a snow cave, and we can be perfectly comfortable in a snow cave." And we did. And they did get all ticked off because we didn't follow the procedures and so forth. But we were—

That was one of the aspects of, you know, my experience in Vietnam that was probably different from so many others, was that—I was promoted to captain when I was in Vietnam. There was not another captain in Vietnam, certainly not another infantry captain, who had less actually infantry command experience. I mean, I didn't even know how to talk on the radio. I mean, I didn't know how to call in an air strike or call in a medevac [medical evacuation] helicopter. I had to learn all that stuff sort of on the fly, and it was, like—it was stressful because I was way, way over my head at the start, just because I didn't have the infantry experience of, you know, commanding an infantry unit back in the States somewhere for a year or two before I went to Vietnam.

GEISMAR: So do you think your time working with the team, working with *the* team in Alaska—did that translate at all to I guess to commanding a platoon or commanding a group of troops? Were you ever in a leadership position when you were training in Alaska?

MORTON: Not so much. I mean, sort of the understanding at the Biathlon Training Center was that we were all competitors, and there were times when we had sort of more official military functions, where we'd get into our regular military uniform, with our rank and so forth, and, you know, we knew that some of the guys were specialists, and some of them were sergeants, some of them were lieutenants; we had one or two captains. But on a day-to-day basis, we were all in our blue training uniforms that had no rank or insignia on it.

So I guess being a member of the biathlon team for two years and interacting with the other team members and the coaches, that—you know, that helped in terms of, you know, my role as the team leader of this mobile advisers team.

GEISMAR: Getting to, I suppose, interact with people kind of regardless of rank and insignia. Was it a different dynamic of interacting than you'd expect from—I guess from a more conventional—

MORTON: Yes, definitely.

GEISMAR: And that helped you when you were in country?

MORTON: Yeah, yeah, I think so, although there was a little bit of an adjustment, not so much for me but when I finally was assigned the other members of my MAT team—a Mobile Advisory Team in those days was comprised of a team leader, who's usually a captain or a lieutenant; an assistant team leader, who was a lieutenant; and three noncommissioned officers. Theoretically there was supposed to be a small weapons specialist, a heavy weapons specialist (that would be mortars rather than, you know, small arms) and a medic.

And in my case, the three NCOs had all been on previous Vietnam tours. They were on at least their second tour. I think I had one guy on his third tour. And so they were career military, and the structure of the military was very important to them. And there were a lot of assumptions that they recognized about the military. And one of the assumptions was that these young, especially ROTC officers, didn't know shit and that in a worst-case scenario, they were going to get them killed, the whole team killed; in a best-case scenario, they would at least be smart enough to

know what they didn't know and they would take the NCOs advice to try to stay out of trouble.

But that was a huge concern for all of these career NCOs, was that they very often ended up working under inexperienced and oftentimes, you know, totally "inept," quote-unquote, leaders.

GEISMAR: Mmm.

MORTON: And, you know, the smart ones paid attention to their NCOs, and if you were lucky, you had good NCOs; if you weren't, you were in trouble.

But I tried to walk the delicate line of recognizing that they needed the structure to be in place. They would not have been comfortable or happy if I had just kind of turned over my leadership position to one of them and say, "Hey, look, I don't know what the hell I'm doin', you know, Sgt. Smith. You basically run this team." They would not have wanted that.

But at the same token, I tried to be tactful enough to let them know that they would have some input based on their experience but that ultimately the decision was mine. And there were a couple of instances where, you know, we were assigned to go out on a night ambush in what was supposed to be a bad area, and—you know, I basically was ordered to do this, and one of these NCOs says, "You're gonna get us all killed." And I said, "Hey, I'm sorry, Sgt. Smith. And you know what? If you feel that badly about it, you can stay here and, you know, maintain the radio." And, you know, I looked at the other two NCOs. "You guys have any problems with that?" And they said, "No." And so—and he—he basically had a hard time living that down. That was a mistake on his part. He realized it. But, you know, it's one of those things that I guess you say happens during the stress of the situation.

GEISMAR: Well, it certainly sounds like it was a very delicate or tenuous—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —position for you to be in.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: And did you find—was that—how did you react to that? How did you deal with that? You said you would take advice from your officers kind of as seemed appropriate? Was that difficult for you? Was that something you kind of picked up on quickly?

MORTON: You know, I tried—I guess—I guess the best way I can describe it is I was fully aware of what I didn't know, and I was also aware that there were—especially these three NCOs or sergeants that were on my team, that were on their second tour in Vietnam, so they had a lot of first-hand experience that I didn't have.

When we first were deployed in the first little village that we were supposed to operate out of for three months, they basically fly you in in helicopters, and they deliver basically all of your supplies in this one big Conex container. You know, just a big metal box. And so we got to this little outpost that was nothing more than just mud walls and barbed wire on the [coughs]—sorry, the walls.

And there was—you mentioned that the outset—you talked about you recognized the distinction between being with the big American units and being with the small Vietnamese units. Well, there was even another distinction between that. Within the Mobile Advisory Team program, they had two designations. They had the combat MAT teams and village self-development MAT teams. The combat MAT teams were assigned to ARVN [pronounced AR-vin; Army of the Republic of Vietnam] battalions usually, and they actually went on operations with the ARVNs. They were just sort of attached to the ARVN unit, so if the ARVN unit was on some sort of a big sweep operation, they were with it, and they were oftentimes helping calling in gunships or medevacs, things like that. And oftentimes those MAT teams—they were definitely in the thick of it with the ARVN unit that they were advising.

The other—by the time I got there—I arrived in, as I say, late summer 1970. By that time, a lot of places in Vietnam were sort of shifting into what they called the pacification program, where it was definitely trying to win the hearts and minds of the people, trying to help set up village governments, trying to get them to be more loyal to the government of Vietnam than the Viet Cong and then the North Vietnamese.

And, you know, there was a certain—"animosity" may not be—may be too strong a word, but there was not a lot of love or respect for the North Vietnamese among the typical little South Vietnamese rice farmer, you know, that we interacted with every day. They had some resistance, and it may not have been political, from the standpoint of communism versus democracy or—and there are all kinds of different sort of ethic and religious issues going on. There were huge, let's say, rivalries or animosities between the Catholics and the Buddhists, and there was a very strong Catholic presence in the country. And then there were all these other, smaller religions: Cao Đài, Hòa Hảo. And they were all sort of intermixed. A lot of them were animists. You know, you would very often tell your counterpart, "Okay, I think we've got to go out on an operation today and check these three outposts," and, you know, he'd just look at you and say, "You know, the stars aren't aligned for an inspection of those outposts today."

And, you know, your typical reaction is, "C'mon! Are you shittin' me?" But the reality is that was very important for some of them. And you'd end up learning to say, "Well, could you consult with the astrologer and find out when the stars might be more favorable for an operation that would inspect those outposts?" And they would have this great sense of relief and say, "Yeah, [unintelligible], yeah. I will find out from the astrologer." Because you're just kind of showing some respect to their beliefs, and they come back, and they say, "Yeah, three days from now the stars will be aligned." And, yeah, oftentimes I say, "Okay, three days from now we'll do the operation."

GEISMAR: And you had the flexibility to—

MORTON: Not always.

GEISMAR: In some cases? Gotcha.

MORTON: Not always. Sometimes—you know, some of these operations would involve trying to arrange transportation. You know, it wasn't so much in our case because we were one of those village self-development MAT teams. We had a Boston Whaler with a 40-horsepower Johnson motor, and we could get the whole team in the Whaler, and that's how

we got around in the [Mekong] Delta and up and down the canals.

But if we were—and where I was ultimately going is below the ARVNs they had what they called the [South Vietnamese] Regional Forces [sic; Force], and then the [South Vietnamese Popular Forces [sic; Force]. And even below that, they had the People's Self-Defense Forces [sic; Force]. And so those were the groups that we worked with: the RFs, the PFs and the PF—or the People's Self- — PSDFs.

And so we would try to do a lot of training with them and help them learn how to, you know, fire the rifles safely and how to set up, like, advance warning, even simple things like putting communication wire out, on the outskirts of the village with, you know, C-Ration cans full of pebbles so that if somebody coming in at night tripped the wire, you could hear the—you could hear them, basically. But those are simple, inexpensive ways to help them protect themselves. But we ended up working in that, more of that what I would describe as a combat zone Peace Corps, trying to win the hearts and minds. And then the VC [Viet Cong] would come in every night and do the same thing at night.

GEISMAR: Which I'm sure was difficult for you to respond to.

MORTON: It was, especially when—you know, in some cases—there were a couple of incidences where we would work hard to try to get somebody to run for office, you know, and say, "We need—this village must have, you know, a village chief, somebody who is responsible." And so everybody—they're all dodging and trying to be evasive, be polite and everything. And, you know, eventually you get somebody who agrees to run for the position of village chief. And you got through all the motions of having a democratic election, complete with ballot box and everything, and you have an open counting of the ballots, and everything looks great.

And then two nights later or in the morning you get word through your interpreter that you've got to go down to Mr. Minh's house. And you go to Mr. Minh's house, this little, you know, kind of shack made out of reeds and thatch roof, and his wife and two daughters are sobbing their eyes out because the Viet Cong came in the night and took him. And they don't now whether he's alive or dead or where he is, but

he's gone. He's not there. And, yeah, you got him to run for the office of village chief, and he's gone. And it's, like, *Aw, shit*, you know? Win the hearts and minds.

GEISMAR: And so when you were in an area and something like that would happen, would you stay with that village and would you kind of go through the process again, or would you be moving around?

MORTON: At that time, this pacification program, which was the—I think, from what I understand—I didn't understand all this at the time, but I read a couple of books afterwards that helped explain it to me. This was the vision of a guy named John Paul Vann, and he was a legendary character over there toward the end of the war. He had been a colonel, I think got out of the Army, went back as a civilian, and ultimately got quite a lot of power as a civilian consultant. He was committed to this pacification program and believed that if we could follow this to its logical conclusion, we could actually win the hearts and minds and create in South Vietnam enough resistance to communism so that they could have a legitimate democratically-elected government. But he died in a helicopter crash. He was such a force that a lot of his ideas and plans them came unraveled.

But one of the rules of the whole MAT team concept was he didn't want the MAT team getting too comfortable in any one place. He wanted them to—and as part of that, they had what they called the Hamlet Evaluation System. So they had big maps of the whole country, and all the villages and the hamlets were indicated there, and they all had code letters, and the letters, as I recall, went, like, A, B, C, D and maybe E, V or something like that. And A meant it was a perfectly secure village; it was 100 percent in support of the government of South Vietnam. On the other end of the spectrum was a V village, and that was Viet Cong.

Another way to describe that would be from the perspective of the helicopter gunships, it was a free fire zone. Anything that moved was a target, because it was known that anybody in that village was Viet Cong or supported the Viet Cong.

And then there was a range in between. Like, a C village might be relatively secure for Americans and South

Vietnamese government troops in the day, but it was probably controlled by the Viet Cong at night.

And, in fact, one of the comical aspects of this whole thing was when I was first being assigned my MAT team and the team was being deployed, the colonel that was in charge of this Phong Dinh Province, the MAT teams in Phong Dinh Province—I'm in his office and he's explaining to me where he's been. He's looking at his map, and he's saying, "Oh, I can't put you there. We just pulled a MAT team out of there. I can't put you there. We could put you there, but that's a B village, and you wouldn't really be accomplishing much."

Oh, my gosh, I don't know. He said, "Well, I think I've got to put you in Ton Phuoc Hung." And I'm looking, *Where the hell's Ton Phuoc Hung?* And then he points to it on the map, and it's a D village. You know, I was totally over my head, you know, just in so many ways, but I had read enough to know that MAT teams were not supposed to be deployed in D villages because they were basically too dicey, and it was felt you couldn't really defend the MAT team if it got into trouble.

And I said, "But—" And this guy's a full colonel. And I'm, at that point, first lieutenant. So I'm saying, "Uh, but, sir, but correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't one of the directives of the Hamlet Evaluation System is that you can't deploy a MAT team in a D village?" And he turns around at me, you know, fiery eyes. He says, "Lieutenant, that becomes a C village when you're there. Friendly presence elevates it to C." And I'm thinking, *Oh, okay.*

And, of course, that was total bullshit. And the helicopter that dropped us off—and it was almost comical because he—they make a big display out of it when they deploy a MAT team, and they invite all the local elders and all of the important people in the village and the surrounding hamlets. And they make a big deal out of it: "And now this Mobile Advisory Team is going to be here, and they're going to help you in all these different ways, and they'll be able to support you" and so forth.

And so [chuckles]—there are, I think, two or three helicopters that fly in to drop off us and our gear and all these dignitaries, and so we have this hour-long ceremony,

and all of the local villagers are, you know, looking through the concertina wire. "What's goin' on here?"

And then they leave us there with our gear. As the helicopters take off, they're shot at, in broad daylight, from right across the canal. And the choppers get hit which—you know, in some instances it's no big deal, but the lead chopper's got an American full colonel and a Vietnamese full colonel that have just gone through this whole big deal about what a wonderful thing it's going to be that we're going to be there to help pacify their village.

And I think we were in that village—we were supposed to be there three months. I think we were there three weeks, and they finally—every time they came in with supplies, they got shot at, and they finally said, "Yeah, we gotta get you guys outta there."

So it turned out my comment wasn't all that off target, yeah.

GEISMAR: Not that far off the mark. Did you guys on the ground face any issues while you were in the village, or was it mainly just the helicopters coming in and out that were—

MORTON: You know, it was—it was really interesting. I mean, some of these things are almost bizarre, but one of the things—again, we're sort of in this—not in a combat role; we're in this sort of village self-development role, so one of the first things I do is we take the interpreter and a couple of—you never go anyplace alone. You know, you try to bring a couple of people with you. You leave somebody at the radio, so if you get in trouble you can, you know, call for help.

And so I go down into the village to meet with one of the elders that had come to this thing, and so there's this, I mean, ancient guy, and I think he was Chinese. He was like a—there were a lot of Chinese people in the delta, and I think rather than being Vietnamese, he was Chinese. And he spoke English. And so we start having this conversation. I'm basically saying, "Well, what can we do to help your village? Can we help to rebuild the school?" I know the school had been damaged by, you know, mortar fire or something.

One of the things that was sort of a big hit over there is that a lot of the American and military doctors would do, like, voluntary screenings, especially of kids, and if we found kids

in our villages that had cleft palate, they could operate on them and basically change their lives. And so we were constantly on guard for—are there kids here that either have real, persistent medical problems that our docs could help? You know, oftentimes they would have, you know, all these festering sores because they didn't have any kind of antibiotics or anything like that.

So, you know, I was basically talking with this ancient Chinese guy about, "Okay, what can we do to help your village?" You know, [unintelligible]. Everything's always over a tea. And then he says, "But what about you, Lt. Morton? You have left your wife in Araska [sic]. This must be very different for you than Araska [sic]." And I said, "Yeah, it really is." "Am so sorry. You have no children." And I said, "Yeah, you're right, no children yet. Maybe someday." "Yes, I hope for you someday."

So I'm thinking to myself—I didn't even know, myself, three days earlier that I was going to be in this village. Here's this ancient Chinese guy that you'd walk by thinking he's probably an illiterate, you know, grandfather. But he not only knows that I'm from Alaska but that I'm married and don't have any kids yet. And I think that was just sort of his sort of unofficial, subtle way of saying, "We know all about you, and if you just don't stir up a lot of trouble, we won't stir up a lot of trouble either."

And so, you know, we did our best to try to help them. We helped rebuild a school. You know, we were forced to do some of these elections, and we would go out and check some of these outposts and things, but it was never my objective to say, "Okay, we're gonna organize an operation with our 25 RF troops, and we're gonna go out and find some Viet Cong and kill 'em." I never did that, and I have never any objective to do that.

We were—as I mentioned, there were a couple of times where—it was, again, a comical situation. I'd mentioned we were there at Tan Phuoc Hung for three weeks. Then they pulled us back to the district headquarters, which was a more secure, bigger—actually, I brought in this book to see you get a kick out of this.

GEISMAR: Excellent. Do you mind if I read the name of the book here?

- MORTON: Not a bit, not a bit.
- GEISMAR: Fantastic. The book is *A Journey on the Mother of Waters: Mekong* [sic; *Mekong: A Journey on the Mother of Waters*]. ME-kong, is it pronounced?
- MORTON: Yeah.
- GEISMAR: It's by Michael [S.] Yamashita.
- MORTON: So I just spotted this in the bookstore, but that's Phung Hiep, and that's—it's a small city, I guess you'd say, in the heart of the delta. I've got a map here. I can show you here, too. It's not a great map, but—so this is Saigon, which is now, of course, Ho Chi Minh City. This is Can Tho, which is the major city in the delta. And as you can see, all of this is regarded as the Mekong Delta.
- GEISMAR: Right.
- MORTON: It's all flat. It's all canals, a lot of jungle, and, you know, your feet are always wet.
- GEISMAR: Right.
- MORTON: So Can Tho is the main city in the delta, and then—this little city here, Phong Hiep, is too small to show up on this map, but it's about down in here. And then Tan Phuoc Hung was a little tiny hamlet that I first was assigned to. It's somewhere out in the sort of no-man's-land out in here.
- GEISMAR: So this is south of Long Mỹ,—
- MORTON: Yeah.
- GEISMAR: —which is south of Can Tho and south of Saigon.
- MORTON: That's correct. That's correct.
- GEISMAR: Excellent.
- MORTON: And the only real activity in here is that at that time, the North Vietnamese had become very effective. You've heard them talk about the HỒ Chí Minh trail.

GEISMAR: Mm-hm.

MORTON: And the Hồ Chí Minh trail went down the western border of Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia, and even when I was there, they would go all the way down into what they called the U Minh Forest, which was on the far western side of the delta. And then they would infiltrate back—they could, with relative impunity, just get all this material, men, troops, ammunition, rice, of course, which is what they ate, and they would carry it on bicycles. They'd have bicycles with bamboo poles, and they could carry as much rice or artillery ammunition on a bicycle as we could carry in a pickup truck. One guy with a bamboo pole strapped to the handlebars and the bicycle just stacked with bags of rice or artillery rounds.

And they would walk this stuff all the way down the border between Cambodia and Vietnam, infiltrate basically into the U Minh Forest, and then gradually work their way back up through Vietnam, wherever their missions were.

GEISMAR: Right.

MORTON: You may have read about the Tet Offensive, and that was their attempt to really, you know, first of all, shock everybody and initially was an effort to take over and say, "Okay, this is it. We're gonna make our—" And one of the things that just dramatically surprised both the Americans and the South Vietnamese forces was how many North Vietnamese had infiltrated throughout South Vietnam. They did it like that.

So we were down in an area where we would occasionally hear—sometimes local Vietnamese people would come up and say, you know, "There are 200 soldiers in green uniforms, wearing pith helmets, walking up the other side of the canal a kilometer south of here." And, you know, that's a description of an NVA [North Vietnamese Army] unit. You know, if we had been the target, it would have been all over. But in every instance like that, they had another mission, and they, in the middle of the night, walked right by and never—you know, we were just very lucky in that regard.

GEISMAR: And was that information something that you ever felt you could act on?

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: Would you try to send that—

MORTON: Yes.

GEISMAR: —I guess to a headquarters?

MORTON: Yes.

GEISMAR: And do you think it was acted upon?

MORTON: No.

GEISMAR: No? [Chuckles.]

MORTON: No. And I learned, again—one of the books that I read that helped explain a lot to me was *A Bright Shining Lief: John Paul Van and America in Vietnam*. I think it's by [Cornelius M.] "Neil" Sheehan. But it's a lot about the pacification program. And one of the things—we happened to be in this little village. I later got reassigned back to Tan Phuoc Hung after a time in Phong Hiep. And during the second time in Tan Phuoc Hung, we did have one of these NVA units walk right up the side of the canal. Basically must have gone right past us in the middle of the night.

And when the locals started coming—the local people in the village started coming in, and they wanted to get inside our wire for protection. And at first there were just a few of them, and then there were dozens and dozens. And so it became apparent that it was a legitimate threat. They weren't making it up. There were a lot of NVA troops in the area.

And so I radioed it up, and, you know, I said, "You know, I can probably get you coordinates for an artillery strike." And so we did that. And we said, "We'll try to put out some listening posts and try to get a sense of when they're coming through, the coordinates, and you can shoot 'em."

GEISMAR: Right.

MORTON: And they would do—one of the things that was sort of a little bit I would say anxiety creating is for much of the time, we were down in this village, Tan Phuoc Hung. We were about 10 kilometers away from Phong Hiep, the district headquarters. And they had two 155 [mm] Howitzers there. These are big guns. And every night for half an hour or so,

since we were in a relatively dicey area, they would shoot what they called H&I fire, harassment and interdiction fire. So they didn't have a specific target; they were just launching high-explosive rounds out around the area where we were.

Now, theoretically they knew exactly where we were, so assuming they weren't all stoned on dope or something, they weren't going to drop any on top of us or the other outposts. But they were dropping them in all around us, and you would—you know, as it started to get dusk—these guns were 10 kilometers away, and you'd hear ooh-WOOM, ooh-WOOM. And you'd think, *Oh, shit, here it comes.*

And then a few seconds later it would be [imitates a high whistling sound, almost like a soprano wolf]—kaboom! And then the ground would shake, and they'd just keep shooting. Boom, boom. It sounds like a freight train going overhead. And you'd just lie in your bunk, praying that somebody didn't take one too many cranks on the site and drop one in on top of you.

But we knew those guns were there, so we said, "Okay, we've got a target for you." And they never shot them. And I never understood why until I read Sheehan's book. We were on a province boundary line. And it's—right in the book it talks about how some of these province chiefs were all basically on the take, saying, "Well, if you shoot artillery in *my* province and kill any civilians, I'm gonna have your head. But, I mean, if you make it worth my while, I will give you permission to shoot artillery in my province."

And so theoretically, whoever was responsible for getting permission for this artillery barrage, either wasn't willing to pay the bribes or didn't talk to the right person or didn't get permission from the province chief. Who knows? Maybe the province chief was a Viet Cong sympathizer; he knew that these NVA were coming up that way, and he wasn't going to mess with them. I mean, there were all of those things, none of which I knew at the time.

GEISMAR: Right.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: I had a quick question about the Howitzers,—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —another question about I suppose the politics that were happening, but with the Howitzers, did you ever receive warning that they were going to be shooting, or the warning was when you heard the whoomph?

MORTON: That's it.

GEISMAR: Gotcha.

MORTON: That's it.

GEISMAR: So there's no way to warn the villagers, I'm guessing, either.

MORTON: No, no. And in fact, one of my I guess I'd say worst memories: When were there in Tan Phuoc Hung the second time, we were in what you would have called the main RF outpost, but it was at a time when they were constantly trying to build more outposts to create security in this dicey area. So one after another, maybe a couple of kilometers up one canal, they'd build another outpost, and they'd, you know, make these mud bunkers and put out concertina wire and put Claymore mines in the concertina wire and cut down the jungle so that they could theoretically see the enemy coming.

And then they'd put, you know, ten or twelve or twenty RFs or PFs in there to try to defend it. And those outposts would then show up on the maps as being, you know, there and no-fire zones. They would have those coordinates on the maps for air strikes and artillery. And then those outposts, themselves, would oftentimes be places where they would have at least mortars. I'm not sure they ever had any, you know, Howitzers, any 105s or anything like that, but they had mortars.

And there was this one particular Vietnamese RF who was a cocky, young—you know, just a cocky, young, arrogant kid, and he was a big shot because he had a 4.2-inch mortar. It was a big one. The other ones were smaller. I can't—I should be able to remember exactly what the different designations are, but there were two common mortars. One was smaller and more portable; the other was bigger and

had a bigger range. And so this guy was cocky because he had this big mortar.

And one night, one of the other outposts came under attack, so he started shooting at it with his mortar, but either he screwed up or the Viet Cong were smart enough to, you know, bring in a lot of civilians with them to kind of—you know, as a shield. And then we started getting all these casualties coming into our outpost because we had a medic at ours. And it was just a—it as a horror show because, you know, it was dark and there were dozens and dozens of civilians that were severely wounded.

And it was my first time seeing kind of that much carnage all at once, and I had always kind of wondered a little bit—my medic was this saintly guy from Texas. His father was a sharecropper, and he joined the Army so he could get enough food. And the guy was just a saint. And I always wondered, is he didn't seem to me to—I wondered if he would hold together if we got in a scrape. Well, boy, when they started bringing in these civilians that were so badly shot up, he just shifted gears and took over. And it was just beautiful to see because, you know, I'm sort of standing around, not knowing exactly what to do next, and he just took over. And he said, "Capt. Morton, grab this gauze right here and put it on that girl's abdomen right there, and take this in your hand and hold it on that girl's compound fracture right there. I'll be back in a minute." And he's just going triaging, you know, these dozens of wounded civilians. You know, he was remarkable. Terrific, terrific guy.

But it was another—one of these—as is I think so often the case in war, it was just a total screw-up, you know? Probably all of those injuries—and I'm sure there were a number of deaths—was probably—should have been recorded as friendly fire.

GEISMAR: Right. And who knows if they were. They weren't?

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: Sorry. Taking a second.

MORTON: Yeah, yeah. Sure, sure.

GEISMAR: Yeah. So in your opinion, was your presence there—was it helpful in any way to either the local villagers or did you have the feeling that you were making much of a difference while you were there?

MORTON: Mmm. Boy, that's a great question, and, you know, I would think—I would think that a large number of Vietnam vets would struggle with that question if they really were honest about it. I mean, you could answer that question in so many ways. I mean, we sure as hell didn't leave that country better than we found it. I mean, I don't know how—I think they estimated more than a million South Vietnamese casualties and, what, 58,000 Americans?

I mean, another way to say it is: Did I do—I probably didn't do as much damage as I might have done. I mean, if I had taken a different attitude—I certainly had the capability and resources to do a lot more damage than I did. From the time I was assigned my MAT team, sort of my private goal was to get those other four Americans home—you know, to say as much as possible, we're going to do our mission, but, you know, my objective is not to win the war; my objective is to get these other four guys home.

You know, I feel it wasn't—ironically—I was a MAT team leader for the first half of my tour, and then I heard that—there was a school for advisers north of Saigon, where all the MACV [Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] advisers went for an 18-day course to update them on the current situation in the country. And they send out a memo or a directive saying, you know, "If you are interested in applying to be an instructor in the advisers school, let us know." And selfishly, I was interested because, having been through that advisers school when I first came in country, I knew that it was in a relatively secure compound, so I could run.

And I thought—you know, there was no chance out in the boondocks to do any kind of training, so I thought if I could get an assignment at the advisers school, I could probably at least run a little bit every day, which would—I still had hopes of making the '72 Olympic team, getting back to Alaska. And so that was kind of a motivation. I said, *Okay, I'll apply for this.*

And, you know, long story short, I applied for it. I went up to the advisers school for—they give you, like, three days to

memorize an hour-long course and present it to the other instructors, and then you're either selected or not. And I was selected.

So then I went back to basically pick up my stuff from my team, and I had a chance during that transfer to meet and kind of brief my replacement. He was on his second tour. He was a captain from someplace in the South, and he made it very clear to me that he was there to kill him some Cong and go home with some decorations.

And two weeks after he took over my team, he took them all out in the boat on an ambush, and they were ambushed by the Viet Cong, and he was badly wounded enough in the leg so he got sent back to the States. My medic got shot in the head but survived. My interpreter was killed. He had two kids. And the other—two of the NCOs ended up bailing out of the boat and spending the night in the canal, trying to evade the Viet Cong. They were rescued the next day by the district adviser's team.

So I've always felt, you know, to some degree guilty that I in a way abandoned my team and that the dingbat that took them over jeopardized it, you know. I like to think that—I had made it clear to the locals that, you know, we were there to try to help them, and, you know, I guess we had this unstated understanding. That clearly wasn't his attitude, and, you know, my feeling was, you know, *If he gets himself dinged up, that's his own fault. He probably got what he wanted. He got a Purple Heart.* But the interpreter was a wonderfully capable, loyal Vietnamese guy, and it was a tragedy that he got killed.

GEISMAR: Thank you. Thank you for being so open with answering that question. I apologize, because I feel like that was a question that—

MORTON: No, no, no.

GEISMAR: —was not well phrased.

MORTON: No, it's all good stuff.

GEISMAR: Thank you. And I think that that kind of leads me to another question, a couple of questions.

MORTON: Sure.

GEISMAR: But this one will kind of be—you were mentioning, I guess, so far as effectiveness goes with the pacification aspect or goal.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: You were clearly more focused on kind of trying—I think you said, you know, trying to do good and not stir things up too much.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: And clearly this other—this other captain who came in was a little bit more interested in stirring up.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: And do you think that was a widespread—was there kind of a dichotomy between maybe other officials or other officers who wanted to—who were working the pacification project, officers who were a little bit more aggressive? Was that kind of something that you had to work with while you were there?

MORTON: Yeah. Yup. You know, one of the things that was both interesting and perhaps a little bit scary about a MAT team is you were, to a significant degree, kind of on your own, and the up side of that was that on a day-to-day basis, you know, it was kind of up to your own conscience about what you did. I know that, to be really candid about it, there were a lot of MAT teams that created a fairly cushy situation for themselves and just maintained, you know? They probably drank a lot of beer, and they just kind of stayed out of trouble, stayed out of sight, and they were a presence in the village, and they didn't do much.

There were other MAT teams where probably the MAT team leader was very highly motivated. There were some—you know, you know enough to know that there are Vietnam vets of all persuasions and some who still strongly feel that if the government hadn't tied our hands behind our back, we could have gone in and cleaned house. "And it may have taken killing all the Vietnamese, but by God, we could have won."

And there are others who say, you know, we shouldn't have been there in the first place, and everything we did over there was a detriment to, you know, the Vietnamese people. It's remarkable that they are as resilient as they are and as—everybody who has been to Vietnam since said they're so gracious to Americans, and even the North Vietnamese commanders who, you know, fought so bitterly and in some cases were, you know, outnumbered and outgunned, and they're very philosophical about it now.

But, I mean, I think we're the ones that are still having all kinds of angst about—and we obviously haven't learned our lesson because we're doing similar things in Afghanistan and Iraq. But that's probably another interview. [Both chuckle.]

GEISMAR: That could be.

So moving forward, you said that after going to the training—I think you said MACV—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —was kind of the other designation. So you were able to go to that facility and become a trainer of other MAT leaders?

MORTON: I was an instructor, yup,—

GEISMAR: Gotcha.

MORTON: —for all of the incoming advisers. And, you know, by that time, that was probably early 1971 or maybe the middle of winter or something like that. And so my objective there was just to try to do the best I could to train these guys and help them understand the dynamics and subtleties of what they were going to encounter. And a lot of that—you know, one of the courses that I taught—I just got assigned these courses as other instructors rotated home. And one of the courses that—it actually was my favorite, and I enjoyed teaching it, and I think I got good response from the students—was Guidelines to Good Relations with the Vietnamese. And it was all about—

Another one I taught was Religions of South Vietnam. And if you understand how religious they are and how important religion is to their everyday thinking, it helps you—it helps

you get along with them. And there's so many Americans that come in and, you know, like a bull in a china shop and have no regard for the Vietnamese lifestyle or philosophy or religious beliefs. And for most Americans, it's totally outlandish that, let's say, a devout Catholic would also contact a local astrologer about, you know, a possible match for a wedding. You know, like, okay, a young Vietnamese soldier has fallen in love with a Vietnamese girl. He's a devout Catholic, but he's going to go to the astrologer to find out: Is this an auspicious match? It's totally consistent in their culture. But, you know, if you were a Catholic and you asked your priest, "Well, before we ask you for these premarital classes, I want to go check with the astrologer to see if it's a good match," it probably wouldn't go over too well in this country.

You know, there are so many things that we just take for granted. For example, one of the things I remember is in Vietnam they just cherish their kids, cherish their children. They'll do anything for their kids. But they also regard the head as sort of the center of not just their brains and their intelligence but their spirit, and so it is not a good thing to pat a kid on their head. You know, of course, that's a very common gesture for Americans. So if an American G.I., you know, is walking through some village and a little kid comes up, the first thing he's going to do is pat the kid on his head which is a big faux pas in Vietnam.

And even things as simple as—you know, it's very common for us if we want somebody to come over, is to use our index finger to get their attention. Well, that's how they call pigs in Vietnam. You use that finger. If they want you to come over, they turn their hand facing the floor, and then they use their whole hand almost the way we'd, you know, splash water or something. That's the way they get attention.

So here we are, our whole culture, you know, is just totally opposite, and every time an uninformed American wants to get a Vietnamese's attention, he's insulting them—

GEISMAR: Right.

MORTON: —by saying, "Hey, pig, come over here." So those are the kind of things that I tried in my course to explain to these guys. And hopefully it helped. Yeah, I guess that's—

- GEISMAR: It seems like an issue that you ran into that was, kind of, time.
- MORTON: Mmm.
- GEISMAR: And I'm sure that, you know, you were—if I remember correctly, you were in Vietnam from '70 to '71.
- MORTON: Right.
- GEISMAR: The summers.
- MORTON: Yeah.
- GEISMAR: And I guess when you only have a year of time with that—clearly you learned a lot, a lot that was on the fly.
- MORTON: Right.
- GEISMAR: But there's also kind of the—you know, it seems like it's a short enough period of time that when you're there, you're also looking forward—
- MORTON: Absolutely.
- GEISMAR: —at the same time as you're trying to be so present while you're there, and I guess how did you deal with that while you were on your tour?
- MORTON: The other thing—you can ask any Vietnam vet, anyone, and I'll guarantee you, almost regardless of the service—probably it's true with the [U.S.] Marine Corps as well as the Army, maybe even [U.S.] Air Force, but the greeting, the standard greeting—every single day when you got up, you wouldn't say, "Good morning" or "How are you?" or "How's it going?" The greeting was, "How short are you?" And that expression meant, "How many days left do you have?" And every single Vietnam vet over there could tell you to the day how many—and that became almost a game. You would say, "Oh, I'm a double-digit midget," meaning, "I just went under a hundred days." Or you would say—and the guys would elaborate on it and say, "Oh, I'm so short, I have to climb up out of my boots in the morning" or "climb into my boots in the morning to get on up."

There were all these expressions around that, but everybody knew, every single day, how many days. It was a tour—a standard tour was 365 days, and it was—you knew. You knew the day that you were scheduled to go home. And everybody—that's just—that's just constant terminology.

GEISMAR: Was it ever difficult for you—I suppose when you're being a MAT team leader as opposed to an instructor, was it difficult for you to be, I guess, invested in the country and be, you know, so aware of what's going on while also kind of looking forward to—I guess, like, could you—could you look forward to the future while you were there?

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: Did that ever distract you?

MORTON: The two things you looked forward to were what they call DEROS [pronounced DEE-rohs]. I think it stands for Date of Rotation Stateside [sic; Date Eligible for Return from Overseas] or something like that, which was, you know, your last day.

And R&R [rest and recuperation]. And one time during your tour you got to leave country for, I don't know, a week or something like that. And I had—I was married at the time. My wife was in Alaska. So we met in Hawaii and had R&R in Hawaii. And I still think that was one of the most difficult things I've ever done in my life, is to get back on the plane to go back to Vietnam from Hawaii, because that time, unlike the first time—the first time you get on the plane you have no clue. You don't know what you're going to encounter. You have absolutely no clue.

But coming back from R&R—and in that context was—Hawaii really was the paradise that it's portrayed as in all of the travel brochures. I mean, they meet you getting off the airplane, and put, you know, a flower lei around your neck, and your wife's there to greet you. And then you go off to—we went to this military, you know, R&R center on the big island, and it was just great.

But then you go back to the airport and go back to Vietnam, and that—that time, you know what you're headed for, and it's, like, *Whoa!* I'm astounded they didn't have more people go AWOL [away without leave] and desert. Of course, in a

place like Hawaii there wasn't much place to go, but it was just—it was awful.

GEISMAR: And so you had that period of R&R while you were still working as a MAT—gotcha—as a MAT leader?

MORTON: Yup.

GEISMAR: So you mentioned earlier that you enjoyed teaching classes on kind of relations, I want to say,—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —or how to interact well with the populace.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: Did you have a good relationship—you said you had a good relationship with your interpreter. Would you say that—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —your relationship with the people in the village—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —was also good?

MORTON: Yeah, yeah. It was—we lived in very close quarters. I mean, this Tan Phuoc Hung village that I spent most of my time there—we were in this little triangular-shaped mud bunker with—I think there might have been, like, 24 RF soldiers and their families. And so, you know, all the wives and kids are all in these little shanties that are sort of constructed against the mud walls of this outpost, and so, you know, everybody's there. You know, there's one sort of a latrine, and not a lot of privacy.

GEISMAR: Right.

MORTON: And you can smell what everybody's cooking for supper every time, and the kids are crying, and the place was just infested with rats, and so we were always—the medic had a real things about rats, so he was always inventing more creative ways to kill rats. And the Vietnamese would eat them. A lot of them were big because there was so much

rice to eat, so he'd kill these rats and give them to the Vietnamese, and they'd eat them.

GEISMAR: How big is big?

MORTON: They were like that. [Demonstrates.]

GEISMAR: Small cat size?

MORTON: Yeah, yeah.

GEISMAR: A medium-sized cat?

MORTON: Right, right.

GEISMAR: Were they vicious, I suppose? Would you ever have an issue with bites?

MORTON: I remember I had this sense—and I honestly can't tell whether it was just a dream or my imagination, but we had mosquito nettings. We had, you know, bunks and mosquito nets, and it was very, very hot, so sometimes you just—you wouldn't—you'd just lie on your bunk, maybe in your undershorts, and sweat. And then occasionally I can remember rolling over, and this one memory I have is having my arms hang out from under the mosquito net, on the floor, and then I had a sense of something nibbling a finger. And, you know, I looked down, and it's one of these rats nibbling on my finger.

And then one night, we're in this—as I say—described this bunker. And one night we had all gone to sleep. It was dark, and all of a sudden there's this, you know, gunshot in the bunker. BAM! And I had no i- —everybody work up, and they're horrified, and it's inside the bunker, so all the other Vietnamese, everybody's, you know, alarmed.

GEISMAR: Mmm

MORTON: And I hear this very saintly, I almost thought pacifist medic, Sgt. Boone, say, "Forty-five." And he had shot his 45<sup>th</sup> rat. He thought it was sort of celebratory to kill his 45<sup>th</sup> rat with a .45 [pistol].

GEISMAR: [Chuckles.] So the rats were a bit of a—

MORTON: They were an issue for him, definitely.

GEISMAR: Mm-hm, mm-hm. Certainly.

This kind of brings me to another question. I guess, what type of food were you eating when you were working as a MAT leader, and was the adjustment to eating food in Vietnam—was there any difficulty with kind of making adjustment to local fare?

MORTON: Well, yes and no. The answer is yes and no. We were sort of expected to, what they say, “live off the economy,” so basically, you know, buy our food—they gave us, like, a subsistence fund as a Mobile Advisory Team, but we were—this was all part of winning the hearts and minds as we’re eating what they eat, living with them.

GEISMAR: Mm-hm.

MORTON: Fortunately, I’m not real fussy about what I eat, so it was—actually, well-cooked Vietnamese food is good. And a lot of rice, a lot of vegetables, like, you know, lettuce or, I don’t know, different types of leafy greens, some cucumbers, some tomatoes. And then whatever meat they had or fish—and, of course, in the delta they had a lot of fish, and that was always cut up very small, so it would be in the rice, you know, sort of like if you went to a Chinese restaurant here and got pork fried rice or something, with little tiny pieces of meat in it. And that’s what we often had. But you never knew what the meat was. You know, it could have been rat, could have been dog. They ate dogs over there. There were a lot of, like, feral dogs.

And the other part of it that was, you know, a little bit unnerving is the canal was everything to them. The canal was transportation. The canal was irrigation. The canal was also sanitation. It was very common—and this is honest-to-God truth—it was not uncommon to see a Vietnamese guy squatting at the edge of the canal, taking a dump, and 50 feet downstream a Vietnamese woman washing out her cooking pots. And downstream from her would be somebody throwing out a fishing net, fishing in the canal for supper. And downstream from them would be somebody with a cooking pot, scooping water out of the canal for supper.

And actually one of the more comical events I was involved in was we—at our MAT team village in Tan Phuoc Hung, one day the helicopter came in, and there was this civilian represented—an American, who was employed or worked for USAID [pronouncing it YOU-sayd], USAID [spelling out the letters], you know, what, United States Agency for International Development. Okay. So he says, “You guys are on the front lines of this winning the hearts and the minds. We’ve got a couple of projects for you that we want you to institute in your village. And these are gonna help the people you’re working with. It’s gonna be good rapport with the American advisers. And so these are the two projects.

“The first one involves three strains of miracle rice that we have developed in Louisiana. And they create three times the yield of the conventional Vietnamese rice. And they had three harvests a year, so your little rice farmer down here in Tan Phuoc Hung is going to be able to produce nine times the amount of rice in a year.” And we’re thinking, *Well, that sounds good.* “You guys are gonna, you know, do better, sell more rice, better economy” and everything else. And the guy said, “There’s just one small hitch.” And we said, “Okay, what’s that?” He said, “Well, this rice—you know, even though we’ve tried to develop these strains, you know, so that they will achieve the goals we’re after, there’s one aspect of this rice that’s less desirable. And that is that when the Vietnamese steam it in their conventional way, it doesn’t stick together the way Vietnamese rice sticks together.”

So I said, “So in other words, they can’t eat it with their chopsticks.” “No, you gotta teach ’em to use forks.” And I’m thinking, *Aw, right.* “So we’re gonna try to convince them that they can grow nine times the amount of rice, but they can’t use their chopsticks.” He said, “Yup, that’s what we want you to do.”

So he leaves off a couple of bags of this rice, and, you know, we try to get the people to plant it. To be honest, I never knew how that came out because I wasn’t there when they harvested the rice, but my sense is there aren’t a lot of people in the delta using forks these days.

GEISMAR: [Chuckles.] Miracle rice was not catch.

MORTON: I don’t think that caught on.

The other project he asked us about or basically demanded we follow up on was what we referred to as the “shit fish.” And it was very evident that there was a big problem with sanitation, as I just described to you. So the solution that the USAID people had come up with is that—probably also in Louisiana, along with the rice research center—they had developed a variety of catfish that thrived on human feces, and he said, “We want you to take a section of rice paddy and build a dike so that you’ve got a small fish pond in the corner of this rice paddy, and then you’re gonna build, basically on bamboo pilings, a toilet above the fish pond. And when you get that all built, let us know. We’ll send the fish down on the helicopter.

“We introduce the fish to the fish pond and use the latrine, and you’re gonna teach your local Vietnamese people that, by using the latrine, they keep the canal clean, they can grow this fish,” and I said, “So what happens to the fish?” He said, “Well, you wean them off human feces for a couple of weeks, feed them rice or whatever else, and then you eat ‘em.” And I said, “Oh, well that should be interesting.”

GEISMAR: [Chuckles.]

MORTON: So—actually something we ended up doing. And we built a fish pond. They sent the fish. We put them in there, and they certainly had developed what they said they did. There were times where, you know, you’d go out on this little, rickety platform, made out of bamboo, and we had one sort of wooden ammo crate as a little bit of privacy, and you hold on with one hand, take a dump in the water—and the fish pond is probably, I don’t know, four feet below where you’re squatting. And the fish would jump out of the water to—

GEISMAR: [Laughs.]

MORTON: And there were guys—the guys on my MAT team said, “Captain, I’m not doin’ that.” And then, of course, the Vietnamese people had never seen anything like it, and they’re all lining up on the banks of the rice paddy to watch you take a dump. This was all supposed to be winning the hearts and minds. And then at the end of the designated time there, we’d have this big fish fry for the Vietnamese elders. [Chuckles.] They’re all saying, “Thanks, but no thanks.”

- GEISMAR: [Laughs.]
- MORTON: And then the ultimate question that when I tell that story everybody asks is, “Well, what did it taste like?” And the answer is, “What do you think it tasted like.”
- GEISMAR: [Chuckles.] Probably not chicken. [Chuckles.]
- MORTON: It didn’t taste like chicken. And I think, again, that was—my sense—I chuckle at even hearing about USAID in Afghanistan and in Iraq and everything. I think, *You know, maybe they’ve got some terrific programs*—and I know from first-hand experience that they’re very well-meaning folks that are really dedicated to making the world a better place, but, boy, there was a huge gap between the concept and the actual application, in my experience. I’m not saying that it couldn’t work and that maybe there’s a great future someplace for catfish that eat human waste, but I certainly don’t order catfish when I go to a restaurant.
- GEISMAR: [Chuckles.] Hopefully the recipe has gotten better.
- MORTON: Yeah.
- GEISMAR: Hopefully the fish have gotten tastier.
- MORTON: Yeah.
- GEISMAR: If they can.
- MORTON: Right.
- GEISMAR: So another, I suppose, issue for your—or problem that you were facing while working as a MAT leader was certainly upkeeping your training.
- MORTON: Yeah.
- GEISMAR: As an athlete.
- MORTON: That was basically hopeless when I was a MAT team leader. It got a little bit better when I was reassigned to the advisers school.
- GEISMAR: Certainly.

MORTON: It wasn't great, but it was better. I could run a little bit.

GEISMAR: And so was your training predominantly running,—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —or you'd also be doing kind of calisthenics.

MORTON: Right.

GEISMAR: Like, push-ups and things like that?

MORTON: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GEISMAR: Gotcha. There was that supplementing. Was there also kind of an average Army workout that you'd be doing?

MORTON: Yeah, not so much. But interestingly enough, the guy who was the commandant of the advisers school at that time was—he was kind of a physical fitness fanatic, and when he saw me running—and he wanted to know—he was a colonel. Just a terrific guy. You know, he was the real—I had a great deal of respect for him. And he said, “You know, Captain, what are you doin’?” And I said, “Well, sir, I came here from Alaska. I was assigned to the Biathlon Training Center, and I still have hope of making the '72 Olympic team.”

And he said—one of the things he wanted to do—he saw a lot of alcohol abuse, and he knew that there was a certain amount of drug abuse going on, and he asked me if I would be willing to try to help put together a physical fitness program for the advisers school, for the staff, the security platoon and instructors and staff members. And so actually together we kind of put together this program.

And he was great about creating some basically motivational rewards. Like, if somebody ran, you know, five days a week for two weeks, they got an afternoon off in Saigon or something like that. So it turned out to be I think a successful program. It certainly, I think, continued after I left there.

And as a result—I mean, I'm especially grateful for him because technically speaking, at that time, if you ended up getting sent home for some reason, for being wounded or emergency leave or something, any time up until you had

completed a full ten months, technically speaking the tour didn't count, so you, as far as the military personnel [were] concerned, your card went right back into, you know, the hopper in terms of a tour in Vietnam.

If you were over there ten months and one day, that counted as a tour. Technically, you're supposed to be there 365 days, but if you were there ten months and a day and had to go home for some reason, that counted as a tour. So in other words, the chance of you getting another tour right away was unlikely. You were going to have a couple of years Stateside or somewhere else before they sent you back.

GEISMAR: Mm-hm.

MORTON: So I think thanks to the fact that he was interested in sports and physical fitness and that I helped him with that program, he said, "I'm gonna try to get you a curtailment of your tour so you can get back to Alaska early." And as it turned out, he got me I think a 57-day what they call "drop," so I ended up actually spending ten months and three days in Vietnam and got back to Alaska almost two months early.

GEISMAR: And how—I guess how would you describe your homecoming, coming back from being an instructor, especially?

MORTON: Yeah. You know, it was very—it was very uneventful in many ways, and especially after hearing how a lot of returnees were treated. Everybody was supposed to go back through Travis Air Force Base, California, and they had, like, an out-processing center there. But it was also close to Berkeley and close to places that were real hotbeds for antiwar sentiment.

GEISMAR: Right.

MORTON: So there were all those stories about, you know, the G.I.s leaving the replacement station and having crowds of protesters spit on them or throw blood on them and call them baby killers and all that. Well, purely by luck, the flight that I was on—the pilot came on—we left—I think we refueled in Japan. We left, headed for Travis, California. The pilot came on the intercom, and he said, "I'm sorry, guys, but we are facing severe headwinds, and we have to divert to Anchorage, Alaska, to refuel, and there'll be a two-hour

layover. It's a long enough—. And it's your first—the first time you reach American soil, so you'll have to go through Customs. So disembark, we'll refuel the plane, get you back on, and then we'll go to Travis.”

Well, my thought was, *Oh, I am where I'm supposed to be*, so as soon as I get off the plane, I contacted—there was a military representative there, and I said, “Hey, my good luck, but my next duty station is Anchorage, and I'm not flying all the way to Travis.” And this guy said, “Oh, yes, sir, you have to go down there and out-process and everything else.” It was the only time I think in my four years of active duty that I actually pulled rank, and I—this guy was some sort of a senior sergeant, NCO, and I said, “Sergeant, you didn't hear me. I said I'm just coming back from a year in Vietnam. This is my final duty station, Anchorage. I am not going all the way to Travis, California, dinking around for a week there to fly back to Anchorage. Whatever it takes, whoever you've got to talk to, you make it happen because I'm not gettin' back on that plane.” He said, “Yes, sir!” I said, “Okay, good.” And it worked. I got off.

GEISMAR: And was part of your motivation for wanting to stay in Anchorage was that partially the desire to not make the trip? Did you have any concern about—

MORTON: Well,—

GEISMAR: —you having to face those crowds?

MORTON: No, no, no, not at all. My wife was in Anchorage. I knew that I was—every single day that I could be back with the biathlon team was going to increase my chances of making the Olympic team.

You know, the other part of it, too, and it was a very sort of minor thing, but, you know, I'm standing in the—we had heard a lot over there by the time I was there in '71 about the drug problems, and I saw some of that peripherally. But it wasn't like—I didn't see that, *Oh, man, that everybody coming home is stoned out of their mind or hooked on heroin* or something. But I was standing in line, waiting to go through the immigration check or whatever, and all of a sudden these MPs [military police] come charging right—both sides of the line, come right at me. And I'm thinking, *Oh, what is*—and they were—it was no nonsense. You

know, they were—they had their MP helmets on and their web belts with their pistols and everything. And, you know, a long line of us. You know, 200 of us. And they're coming right at me.

And I'm thinking, *Oh, shit, what have done now?* They actually grabbed the guy ahead of me, who was a young—he was younger than I am—and I can't honestly remember whether it was a lieutenant or what, and I'm saying, *What are they after him about?* But as soon as they sort of moved him out of the line, I saw he just urinated all over himself, in his uniform. He was in his, you know, travel, cocky uniforms, and he just peed his pants, all over the front of them.

So, you know, I guess they are trained to look for whatever kind of reactions that they see, that these guys are now getting off an airplane they've been on probably for eight or nine hours, and a lot of them are beginning to get the DTs [delirium tremors] or whatever they are.

GEISMAR: Right, the detox [sic]?

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: Mmm. Mm-hm.

MORTON: And then this guy just peed all over himself, and they're saying, "Okay, you're comin' with us."

GEISMAR: Right.

MORTON: And it's, like, *Ooh!* So that was just one more reason. *As soon as I can just separate myself from everybody else that's going through the out-processing center, the better I'll like it.*

GEISMAR: Gotcha.

MORTON: And it actually—to be honest, it was really fortunate that it worked out. And in terms of kind of reintegrating and everything, I went right back to the unit that I left. You know, a lot of the guys were happy to see me. Some of them weren't so much because they'd already kind of figured out who they thought was going to make the Olympic team, and I was a little bit of a question mark. I mean, I think some of them figured once I went to Vietnam they weren't going to

see me again. And so it kind of—for some of them, it changed their plans a little, and they weren't all that overjoyed to see me, but—

And Anchorage is a very let's say military supportive town. There are two big bases there, Elmendorf Air Force Base and Fort Richardson. It's now a combined—what they call a joint force base. But there was not a lot of—there was far more support for the military there than there would have been in northern California.

So I basically signed in to my new assignment back in the biathlon unit and began training again. And it was basically trouble free as far as reintegration. And to be really candid about it, I really didn't think much about Vietnam after that. I got back, I was immediately engaged in training and trying to make the Olympic team, and it was actually many years—I'm going to say maybe five or six years after I got out of the military and I was teaching school in Anchorage, and probably by then we might have had my daughter, but I still remember my wife and I were watching this show on TV, and the name of the show was *Friendly Fire*. And it was about a mother whose son had been killed in Vietnam, and there had been some cover-up, and she was just trying to find out what happened to her son.

And I think that the show starred Carol [C.] Burnett, and I was sort of just, you know, casually watching it, but as the show progressed, I just lost it, you know? I was just sobbing my eyes out, and it was the first time my wife had ever seen me like that. And it was the first time that I'd ever been aware that, you know, there probably is stuff in there that, you know, you can't—you can't—you don't—you just don't forget, and you don't—you can't gloss it over, and you can't sort of beat it down. I mean, there's a lot more now known about dealing with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], and so I've at least come to recognize that even though I was one of the really lucky ones and didn't get banged up and didn't see the worst of it, there's—I recognize now that there's—it still had an impact.

GEISMAR: Certainly. Certainly. That's very understandable. Would you say that—well, I suppose the coming right back from Vietnam, like you said, you reintegrated with the biathlon team, and then you went on to compete in two Olympics, correct?

MORTON: Yeah. Yep.

GEISMAR: Do you think that that competition kind of gave you something else to focus on?

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: And, I guess, how was—so you said the reintegration with the team—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: Personal relationships may have been a little bit—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —interesting in some aspects.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: So far as the physical side of it or the training side, was that fairly easy to slip back into?

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: A little challenging?

MORTON: No, reasonably. That was good. Yeah, I think it—in retrospect, I was very fortunate that—you know, so many Vietnam veterans—for many of them, it is in many ways the most intense experience they've ever had, and in some cases positive as well as negative. I mean, I remember the day I arrived in Vietnam—and I didn't know anybody. There were a bunch of other officers who said, "We're gonna go over to the officers' club and have a beer. Why don't you come with us?" So I didn't have anything better to do. I said, "Fine." I went over.

I ended up sitting next to a young guy, clearly younger than me. He might have been only 18 or 19 years old. He was at this officers' club at this replacement station in Saigon, and he had just completed a tour as a medevac pilot. He was a warrant officer, medevac pilot. Those were among the most courageous guys in the war. No weaponry on the helicopters. They didn't want to waste the weight of a

machine gun and the ammunition when they could take another casualty. So the only weapons they had was a .45 pistol that the pilot carried.

This guy was due to go home the next day, and we're sitting there—I'd never seen him before, never met him; he just happened to be the only guy at the table. And he ends up saying, "You know, I'm thinkin' of re-uppin'." And I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah. You know, for the last year, every single day I was saving lives." [His voice cracks with emotion.] "And what am I gonna do, go back home to"—I think he was from Arkansas or something. "Am I gonna go back home to bag groceries or pump gas?" He said, "I can stay. I can stay here and save lives tomorrow."

You know, I didn't have anything to say to him. I can't—you know, I said, "Jesus, the fact that you survived a year is a miracle. You're gonna try to beat the odds for *another* year?" But, at the same time, how could you argue with what he was saying, he was doing? I mean, that's no exaggeration that he was saving lives every day. [Again, his voice cracks.] And in the time we're sitting there at the table, he decided he *wasn't* going home; he was going to re-up. I have no idea whether he made it. I don't even remember his name. But it was—you know, there are those kinds of sort of poignant moments, you know, like, all the time. It was no big deal. It's all the time in that context.

I mean, I felt so grateful to get back to Alaska and have a focus, and I didn't—I wasn't worrying about what I was going to do the rest of my life. I wasn't worrying about whether what I did in Vietnam made a difference or—none of that. I was thinking about *I've got to make the '72 Olympic team, and I've got just a few months to try to do that.*

GEISMAR: Right. It kind of gave you something to focus on.

MORTON: Absolutely.

GEISMAR: That kind of leads me to my next question, which would be do you think your experience in the war—or how did your experience kind of in the war and meeting people like that medevac officer—did that kind of shift your perspective at all coming back, or was that something that—again, kind of the training was maybe a buffer or—

MORTON: Mmm.

GEISMAR: —I guess how did that experience interact with the training?

MORTON: Well, I guess one of the things that it may have helped me understand is that probably like—I don't know, maybe like you, maybe like many of your classmates, if you're reasonably successful as a young person, you end up—and, to be honest, a lot of us are told this by our parents, that if you work hard and apply yourself, you can achieve anything you want. I mean, you have to devote yourself to making it happen, and you have to work hard, use the talents that you have, and you can make it happen. I mean, if you want to be an astronaut or if you want to be a jet pilot or if you want to be a physician, you have the good fortune of being born in a country where that's possible.

And then at some point in your life, not to sound morose about it, but you come to the realization that, you know, it doesn't always work out exactly the way you think it should or the way you had it planned. And I was on the airplane headed for Vietnam and still thinking, you know, *This isn't supposed to happen. I mean, I'm supposed to be training for the Olympics.* And I still believed that when I got to Vietnam, somebody was going to come up to me and say, "Hey, you know, there has been a big mistake. You get right on that plane and get off in Anchorage." I really believed that.

And then you realize that so many of these things that you've taken for granted—I grew up at a time when America was right, and the Soviet Union was wrong. It was no debate. It was very clear. We're the good guys; they're the bad guys. And everybody—you know, you couldn't get anybody in your class in elementary school or middle school to dispute that. They were bad; we were good.

And then you start—you know, have an experience like in Vietnam, and you're seeing things like that un-freakin'-believable dedication of some of these Viet Cong and NVA and how intensely they are committed to their cause, with no support. You know, fighting barefoot in black pajamas, with weapons that we threw away decades ago. But they're putting their lives on the line, and you're thinking, *Whoa! Well, if we're always right, why are these guys fighting so hard?*

And, you know, then you end up hearing stories about our helicopter pilots getting bored and using, you know, the Vietnamese rice farmers' water buffalo for target practice. Well, it just so happens that my MAT team is in that village, and I'm going to try to explain to this guy, whose life savings were tied up in that water buffalo, why some freakin' American chopper pilot, just for the fun of it, blew his water buffalo away. And, I mean, well, if we're always right, you know, why does *that* happen?

You know, the more you get into it, the more you think, *Whoa! It is a helluva lot more complicated* than I thought it was when I was younger. And, you know, what the experience—if you want to say, “How can it help you?” it helps you understand that nothing is ever clear-cut, straightforward, black and white. There are always nuances and always shades of gray. And you know, like, you can go back and say, clearly [Adolf] Hitler was wrong. But if you look at it even a little bit more discriminatingly, there's quite a lot of evidence that the Allies [of World War II] after World War I created the economic situation that allowed Hitler to rise to power, so if you really want to be objective about it, you think, well, clearly Hitler was wrong, but we certainly created the fertile ground for him to gain the power that he gained, so you know, maybe we should take *some* responsibility for that. But anyway. . .

GEISMAR: Certainly. So there was definitely, definitely a shift in perspective.

MORTON: Yeah, yeah.

GEISMAR: Certainly. And I suppose that something I think that we kind of sped right by but I'd like to go back to a little bit is I completely forget to ask you this at the start: Do you mind letting me know what your parents' names were and what their professions were?

MORTON: Oh, oh, yeah, yeah, sure.

GEISMAR: I'm curious, kind of, what they thought about you joining the military, and we can work up to that, but we'll start with what were their names and professions?

MORTON: Sure. Yeah, you bet. Well, my dad—his name was George Morton. He actually was—he flew B-17s [Boeing B-17 Flying

Fortresses] in World War II, right at the tail end of World War II, and I think he got the Distinguished Flying Cross twice or three times. And I had the wonderful—he actually died when I was 12, so I didn't—you know, I certainly knew him and remember him, but I didn't have the chance of, you know, growing up with, you know, having an adolescence with him.

But I did have the chance just a few years ago, thanks to the Internet, to tracking down a survivor of his air crew, a guy who lived in West Plains, Missouri, and I had a [ski] trail project not far from there in Arkansas, so I took a day and drove up and met him. And it was a wonderful experience. He had pictures of my dad when they were in Italy, flying missions in Austria and Germany and Romania.

GEISMAR: Mmm.

MORTON: So he was a World War II bomber pilot, and after the war he started a—he had a Ford [Motor Company] dealership about an hour south of her in Bellows Falls, Vermont.

GEISMAR: Mm-hm.

MORTON: My mother was—she grew up just outside of Boston. They actually got married secretly just before he went to war. Her parents didn't want them to get married before he went over. But he obviously made it. And she—after he died, she tried to run his Ford dealership, but she just didn't have the experience, and it's kind of a cutthroat business, and so she had to give that up and sell it. She's since passed away, too.

But I think my experience—I know it was difficult for her when I was in Vietnam, but I guess for what it's worth, having my dad having been in World War II, I mean, she—I think she recognized at least the, you know, commitment to sort of doing your duty. She was certainly happy when I got back. And when my wife and I had our daughter, she was just thrilled to be a grandmother. I don't think there were any—with her, I know it was difficult for her when I was over there, but having lived through my dad's deployment, she probably sort of, kind of took it in stride.

GEISMAR: Certainly.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: And, of course, if this is too personal, it's no problem at all, but did you ever have an opportunity to talk to her when you got back about your experience and about kind of coming to terms with your experience? I don't know if your father, she and your father may have had any kind of prior experience with that. I don't know if she would have been somebody you could talk to.

MORTON: You know, I probably didn't, and part of that was she was still living in New Hampshire at that time, and I was in Alaska for at least another six years after I got out of the military, so I think probably by the time I moved back here to coach the Dartmouth ski team, the Vietnam experience was pretty much old news.

GEISMAR: Gotcha.

MORTON: So to answer your question, I don't think we ever really did.

GEISMAR: Gotcha, gotcha.

And shifting gears just a little bit,—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —when did you and your wife end up meeting, and then getting married?

MORTON: Yeah. We were classmates at Middlebury, and, ironically, she was engaged to a Dartmouth guy for much of her time at Middlebury, so, you know, we were classmates and friends, but I knew that she was engaged, so I didn't pursue her. And then senior year, I had heard that she and her fiancé had broken it off, so we spent a little bit more time together. And then after graduation, when I went to Alaska, we started writing, and I think it was basically the following—the following spring. It was almost kind of comical. I said, "Well, I'm gonna take—at the end of the ski season, I'm gonna take a month's leave and come back East and pick up some household goods and load up a vehicle and drive my stuff to Alaska, and if you want to come along on the trip, I'd love to have the company."

And at first I thought her parents would never let her do it, but somehow she talked them into it. And by the time we got to Alaska we pretty much decided we wanted to get married.

And so it was, again, kind of comical because she—I said, “Well, do you want to set a date?” She said, “No, I want to get married.” And so we got married in Alaska, you know, a month later.

And, you know, we talked to her folks on the phone and everything, and they were okay with it, and so we did. It was kind of comical because the people at her wedding were basically the other biathlon team members and their wives and families, but none of our families from back East.

GEISMAR: Gotcha, gotcha. Excellent.

And so, let’s see—after you made it back, you continued to be on the biathlon team.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: You went to the 1972 Winter Olympics.

MORTON: Yes.

GEISMAR: Were you competing in those Olympics as well?

MORTON: Yeah. Well, here’s the—in ’72—no, and this is another sort of interesting story—

GEISMAR: Mmm.

MORTON: —but the guy who had given me all the advice about the biathlon team and the ROTC scholarship and signing up for infantry and everything else—

[Recording interruption.]

GEISMAR: Good afternoon. Today is Tuesday, August 18<sup>th</sup>. My name is Bradley Geismar, and I am in Rauner Library on Dartmouth Collage campus in Hanover, New Hampshire, and I am here with John Morton. The time is 3:14 p.m. in the afternoon, and I am here with John Morton, continuing our oral history interview from last week.

John, thank you again for joining me. So I believe that our last interview stopped just before taking about the 1972 Olympics. You mentioned that there was an officer in the Army who was a little bit miffed over you returning early from

your tour in Vietnam, and you said that he may or may not have had a little bit to do with your ability to compete in the 1972 Olympic, so I was wondering if we could hear a little bit more about that.

MORTON:

Yeah. Actually, this situation was that there was a man named George Wilson, who was—at the time I went into the Army, held the position of secretary of the Army Sports Branch. And so he was responsible for a wide array of sporting activities that the military supported.

For example, if he were in that position today—he's no longer—I think he's long since retired. But, you know, if you're aware of—every so often in the Olympics, somebody—there will be an athlete like [William M.] “Billy” Mills back in the 19- —I guess it was 1960 in Tokyo, who had a remarkable performance I think in the 10,000-meter run in track. But he was in the military at the time, I believe, so he was running in the Olympics sort of with the endorsement and support of the Army because obviously it was good for recruiting and good public relations for the Army to have an Olympian, and especially a gold medalist.

And they supported athletes in a number of different sports. In fact, when I—actually, after my infantry officer basic course, when it appeared like I was going to get orders for Ranger school, Airborne school and then Vietnam, and I had been assured prior to that that I was going to go to Alaska, to the Biathlon Training Center, I got in my car and drove all night long to Washington, D.C. And when the infantry office of personnel opened the next morning, I was the first one in the door, and I spoke with a major who was in charge of lieutenant assignments throughout the entire Army—I'm sorry, throughout the infantry.

And his first comment when I explained the situation—he said, “Well, Arthur [R.] Ashe [Jr.] is one of my boys.” He said, “I take care of *him*, and he plays tennis for us, and we get a lot of benefit out of it.” And then his next comment was, “Do they want you in Alaska?” And I said, “Yes, sir, they do.” And he called Alaska and confirmed that they did want me at the Biathlon Training Center. And so he got orders for me, which was an exception to all the other members of my cycle in the infantry school, and so they all went to Ranger school, and I went to Alaska.

And I think that what happened was that contradicted the plan that George Wilson had for me, that he—and I later learned that he was a retired Army colonel. He was—at the time that I met him and communicated with him, he was a civilian but had served a career in the Army, so he obviously was very loyal to the military. And he felt that it would be in my best interest to go to Vietnam first, but that wasn't what we had talked about earlier on.

And I also felt at that time that I had been a little bit misled because he felt I should go to Vietnam because, among other things, since I had accepted the ROTC scholarship and had been granted a Regular Army commission, he thought that I was interested in a career in the military, because all the RA officers coming out of West Point and The Citadel and VMI and the other military schools—they are all intent on a military career.

But that wasn't my interest. My interest was to do what I could to get assigned to Alaska and the Biathlon Training Center. So I think when he discovered that I had basically either gone over his head or around his back or however he perceived it, probably in the back of his mind somehow he said, *Well, I'll settle that score sometime.*

And he was also an officer in the United States Pentathlon Biathlon Association [sic], which was the governing body that oversaw those two sports: modern pentathlon and biathlon. And one of the obligations of that governing body was to name the Olympic team coach and the staff members and oversee the tryouts for the Olympics.

So there was a Swedish ski coach [Sven S. Johanson] in Alaska that they had tried to get rid of while I was in Vietnam. He was not without his faults, but he wasn't—he certainly wasn't negligent, and he was knowledgeable, and I felt like they were trying to basically do a hatchet job on him. And his English wasn't good enough for him to sort of right in his own defense, so as soon as I got back from Vietnam, he asked me if I would write letters on his behalf, which I did.

And I think then—so the combination of me kind of changing my career schedule and helping Sven Johanson, when I ultimately made the Olympic team—they couldn't remove Sven from his job as the Training Center coach, but they had the authority to name whoever they wanted as Olympic team

coach. He was the logical choice because he had coached everyone who made the Olympic team, but they didn't choose him; they picked someone else.

And then I learned after the fact that the person that they picked had explicit instructions "not to race Morton at Sapporo," in spite of the results of the tryouts. So that was a very discouraging and disappointing situation. And ironically, that sort of thing—if it were to occur today, the athletes have all kinds of recourses and arbitration hearings, and when I was a team leader in '88 in Calgary [Canada] and '92 in Albertville [France] and '94 in Lillehammer [Norway], I was made very much aware of all of the athletes' rights and how careful both the coaches and team leaders have to be in terms of selecting the athletes who race, and how transparent you have to be in your selection criteria and everything else.

So in retrospect, had those kinds of let's say opportunities been available in 1972, I probably would have been able to have a strong case for racing. But I didn't know anything about it at the time, and they may not have been available then.

GEISMAR: Mmm. So you certainly had somebody who was a little upset with you for rocking the boat—

MORTON: Yup.

GEISMAR: —when you were racing with the Army. And so moving forward a little bit to 1976, when you were again at the Olympics, competing this time, you weren't competing with the Army.

MORTON: That's correct. I was out of the Army.

GEISMAR: Okay.

MORTON: And I'm trying to think. On the '76 team there might have—by that time—I'm trying to remember when—the irony of this whole situation was that they were so intent on getting Sven Johanson out of his job as the coach, and because he was a government service employee—he was actually GS-12, which I think is about equal to a full colonel in the military—so he was a high-ranking civilian employee. And they couldn't find fault with his job performance, so they ultimately

closed down the Training Center. And that was the way they basically forced him out of a job, was to close the Center.

And I'm trying to think of when that happened, but it might have been 1976 or '77, something in that area, and there might have been a couple of athletes on the '76 Innsbruck [Austria] team, biathlon team that were still active-duty military, but I think the majority of us that made the team may have been members of the unit but were out and had fulfilled our military obligations.

GEISMAR: Do you know what motivations they would have had for trying get Sven out of his position as head coach? Was it because of his status as somebody—as a foreigner—

MORTON: No.

GEISMAR: —or was there something else at play?

MORTON: Yeah, it was an interesting, kind of convoluted situation. And probably more than anything else, a personality conflict—I mean, strong personalities and strongly-held beliefs. And to be fair, Sven was—to sort of pardon the lack of political correctness—he was a classic bull-headed Scandinavian and that his answer to almost any problem or situation was just work harder. And that achieved a lot of success for him when he was a young athlete in Sweden. And he probably was capable of working harder than almost anybody else he encountered.

But that kind of philosophy is not always effective with Americans. I mean, for a Swede, when he was growing up in the late '40s, '50s in Sweden, if you made it as a Nordic skier, your future was assured. I mean, you were [the] equivalent of, you know, [Thomas E. P.] “Tom” Brady [Jr.] or any of the most popular professional athletes in our country. You were a celebrity. Everybody knew who you were as a Nordic skier.

The problem was that in America, no matter how hard you worked as a cross-country skier or as a biathlete, even if you were successful internationally, as [William C.] “Bill” Koch was in 1976, winning a silver medal in the 30-kilometer event, it still didn't count for much when you got back home. And it's one of the I guess you'd say paradoxes or inequities of our culture, that a figure skater, for example, that trains

hard, maybe spends quite a lot of money on coaching and camps and all of the things that go along with figure skating, but if they're successful, they have a reasonable insurance—in fact, they almost have a guarantee that they're going to get a nice contract from Disney on Ice or the Ice Capades or something like that, and they have the chance of winning back or earning back what they may have spent to achieve that level of international success.

But for Nordic skiers, cross-country skiers or biathletes—in this country; it's different in Europe, but in the United States— Bill Koch won a silver medal—phenomenal performance. Absolutely phenomenal. He got good support from the ski company he was with, [Skis] Rossignol [S.A.], but that's not a career. And, you know, the reality is that once his international skiing career finished, he was right back in the, you know, sort of employment pool with everybody else. And in fact you could say he was quite a bit behind because all of the bright, capable, motivated classmates or contemporaries had already been to law school or business school or medical school, and now he's 30 and 32, 34 years old, and instead of law school or business school, he has an Olympic silver medal. And for some employers they might say, "Oh, that's pretty neat. But, you know, can you do this?" And that's one of the ironies of "amateur"—quote-unquote—"amateur" sport in the United States.

I mean, it may be a little bit of a stretch here, but you mentioned the award ceremony that I spoke at last Saturday up in Jericho, Vermont. So among the athletes participating, there are lots of promising young athletes but also a couple of national team people, athletes, one of whom was [Timothy J.] "Tim" Burke from over near Lake Placid, New York. He's been the top American biathlete for a number of years now. He's the only American biathlete to have won a silver medal—I take it back. He's one of two that has won a silver medal in world championships. He's the only American to wear the yellow jersey, meaning at one point in the season leading up to the Olympics in Vancouver [Canada], he was the World Cup leader. And it lasted for a few weeks. He wasn't able to sustain it for long, but for an American that's a remarkable achievement.

And it's not too much of a stretch to say—I mean, he's routinely in the top ten in a field of oftentimes over a hundred

competitors from probably 36 to 40 nations. He's routinely in the top ten. So if you put that in perspective and you think of somebody like—well, maybe Tom Brady would be considered one of *the* premier quarterbacks certainly currently playing, certainly one of the top ten, so in a way, Tim Burke is comparable, in a very technically sophisticated support and is achieving a world-class level of accomplishment, and nobody knows who he is.

That's not entirely true. He's very, very popular in Europe. But in terms of financial compensation, I mean, it's remarkable, the difference. Remarkable. Nobody in this country is saying, "Well, I wonder what Tom Brady is going to do for a career when he can't play football anymore." But that's a real question for Tim Burke because he's not making enough money now to secure his financial well-being for the rest of his life.

GEISMAR: Right.

MORTON: Not even close.

GEISMAR: And were these concerns about, I guess, the future—was this on your mind at all following the 1972 Olympics and following your—you know, your completion of your time with the service.

MORTON: Yeah. Yeah, it was. But I had a tremendous bit of good fortune in that when I got out of the—actually, before I got out of the service in the summer of 1972, I was approached by a fellow that I had known peripherally. I hadn't known him very well, but I knew that he was a former Olympic biathlete, a fellow named [Richard N.] "Dick" Mize, who lived in Anchorage. And he was the principal or actually technically called the unit administrator of big junior-senior high school complex in Anchorage. And he asked me if I would consider coaching and teaching at his high school, which to me was a wonderful opportunity.

And he said—to make the offer even sweeter, he said, "Do you have plans to try out for the '76 team?" And I said, "Oh, I haven't really decided yet, but I hate to quit on the disappointment of '72." And he said, "Well, I can tell you this: I can't pay you while you're gone, but I can use your salary to pay your substitute, and your job will be waiting for you whenever you get back. So if you have to take six months off

prior to the '76 games, we'll get a substitute, and your job will be ready, waiting when you get back," which was tremendous.

GEISMAR: Certainly.

MORTON: And so I ended up accepting his offer. I taught at [A. J.] Dimond High School in Anchorage and then took the fall off—you know, I continued to train and compete, not as intensely, but I did compete some in '73, '74, '75 and then took the fall off in '76 and made the Olympic team and made it to Innsbruck.

GEISMAR: And was it difficult making the switch from your time in the service and from the training in Anchorage to being a teacher in school?

MORTON: No, I actually really enjoyed that. It was fun. It was stimulating. It was very hard work. I was an English teacher, and so, as any English teacher will tell you, I mean, you take home papers every night. You have to get the students to write, and the only way you can help them improve is to read and correct or comment on what they write.

So a typical day for me would be getting up fairly early and going to school, teaching—I think in those days the Anchorage school started at, I don't know, 7:30 or 7:40 in the morning. I think school was over at 2:40 in the afternoon. Ski practice started—I coached cross-country running in the fall and skiing in the winter, and so the sports began at 3 and would often go until about 5. I'd go home, have supper and then correct papers until I fell asleep.

GEISMAR: And then work training in somewhere.

MORTON: Yeah, right. Try.

GEISMAR: Mmm.

MORTON: Yep.

GEISMAR: And so if I remember correctly, in college your major was—was it an English major?

MORTON: English, yeah, right, right.

- GEISMAR: Excellent. And then you went to your time in your service, and did you—I guess did you feel like you had preparation for being a teacher?
- MORTON: Well, I actually—when I was offered the job, it was actually just before I got out of the military, and I mentioned to him that I did not have a teaching certificate, and he said, “Well you can take courses at the University of Anchorage, Alaska,” which I did that summer, and then I student taught at Dimond High School that fall, and also I assisted coaching the cross-country runners. And then I think I started teaching full time the following fall. So it took me—I ended up teaching in Anchorage four years before I came back and took the coaching job here at Dartmouth.
- GEISMAR: Excellent. And so—I’m trying to line up that timeline.
- MORTON: Sure.
- GEISMAR: Just after ‘72—you got to go to the Olympics,—
- MORTON: Yes.
- GEISMAR: —begin your time as teaching,—
- MORTON: Yes.
- GEISMAR: —with I’m sure not very much turnaround time in between.
- MORTON: No, no.
- GEISMAR: Certainly. And then go to the ‘76 Olympics,—
- MORTON: Yep.
- GEISMAR: —and then immediately following the ‘76 Olympics, did you continue teaching in Anchorage for a little while?
- MORTON: I did, yeah.
- GEISMAR: And then you made the transition.
- MORTON: Yeah. I felt like—I felt like I was going to be in Anchorage forever. I liked it. I loved working for Dick Mize. He was a remarkable leader and inspirational individual. He’s still

probably one of the sort of strongest role models I've had in my life. And I just figured I would be there forever.

But a good friend of mine, who actually had also been on the biathlon team and had just missed the '72 Olympic team—after '72, he had started coaching, and he began his coaching career at the University of New Hampshire, coached there a few years and then was offered the job at Middlebury. And, of course, we stayed in touch because I was a Middlebury alum. I think sometime in the—I want to say—it might have even been in the spring, early spring of 1978, he called me and said, “Hey, [James W.] “Jim” Page [Class of 1963] is leaving Dartmouth for the U.S. ski team, so they're looking for a new ski coach. You ought to apply.”

And I said, “Aw, man! I mean, why would I want to coach for the enemy?” And he, coaching at Middlebury, said, “That's the best coaching job in the country, and if I were at any place other than Middlebury, I would be first in line to apply for that. It's a great job. It's a great place to be. You really ought to look at it.”

So I did. I called—I knew the fellow who at the time was the director of outdoor programs, [C. Allison] “Al” Merrill, because he had been a U.S. ski team coach and I had been on a couple of teams and also trips that he had arranged, so we knew each other. And I just called him sort of informally and said, “Al, I hear that Jim Page is leaving. Do you think I would be a reasonable candidate for that job?” And he said, “Absolutely. I'll expect your application.”

And so that was it, and I came back for the interview, and it went well, and I—my wife was excited about moving back East because her family was back here, but we had just built a house in Anchorage, and neither one of us really wanted to leave the house we had just built. So we agreed to lease it for a year, with the idea that if things *didn't* work out, we'd just return to Alaska. But it was pretty evident well before the first year was over that it was a great situation, and we both were very happy that we made that choice, and we didn't have any trouble selling the house in Anchorage.

GEISMAR:

And when you came back East in '78, was your time predominantly focused on working as a ski coach, and was that your main interaction with the Dartmouth community? I believe I've also seen some papers that you wrote during the

time, and was that just in your free time, while being a ski coach, you also wrote?

MORTON:

Yeah. Well, one of the things that was sort of an ironic surprise for me was that one of the—I really enj- —I loved teaching and coaching in Anchorage, but it was a little bit wearing because of the time commitment. And although I loved the classroom teaching and I really loved the coaching, I wasn't all that wild about all the paperwork. And so one of the things that was appealing about the coaching job was that, *Hmm, okay, so now I get to spend basically all of my time interacting with the athletes and coaching and not so much paperwork.*

And yet it was not long after I got into the job back here that I realized that it was at least as much paperwork involved as there was being a high school English teacher. I mean, there's all this correspondence to prospective applicants, correspondence to coaches and ski clubs in an effort to, you know, recruit or enroll qualified applicants.

In those days, we tried hard to let's say work with ski companies and equipment suppliers that were eager to get their equipment on promising young athletes to promote their equipment. But we had a lot of athletes on the team, and so I worked hard to sort of spread the wealth among a lot of different athletes, and so there were more ski companies represented, more equipment suppliers, and that all took correspondence, trying to, say, introduce some of these young, promising skiers to company representatives that perhaps hadn't even heard of them.

And there was a certain amount of—my predecessor, [James W.] "Jim" Page [Class of 1963] said, "One of your most important challenges will be to try to set up a strong, vital Friends of Skiing organization that can be an advocate for skiing at Dartmouth and provide, you know, support and encouragement to the team." And so that meant a lot of correspondence to alumni, to people in the ski industry. So there was a lot of writing. [Both chuckle.]

GEISMAR:

Certainly. And undoubtedly during your time as coach, you had a lot of opportunities to interact with the students on Dartmouth campus. And by this point in 1978 the war has wound down. The war is finished for America, at least.

MORTON: Right, right.

GEISMAR: And I suppose I wondering—were the students there—was there a huge shift, I guess, in the way the students interacted at Dartmouth during that time period than you remember from your time at Middlebury? I guess were there different preoccupations that the students had? Did you get much of a sense of what the postwar kind of effect was on the students at Dartmouth?

MORTON: Hmm. Yeah, well, certainly at Middlebury it was volatile. As I described to you earlier, we were required to participate in these Thursday afternoon drill sessions. We had to dress in our ROTC uniforms, and we were basically trained in how to march and—you know, right turn and left turn, about face, and eventually you worked up to where you were actually carrying a rifle, and you present arms and order arms and all these different commands. I mean, mostly I think it's just training you to respond to commands.

But what added to the—I guess you'd say the unique atmosphere was in those days, Middlebury was—I don't know whether it was more liberal than sort of other small, private colleges, but there was a very active antiwar movement, and those students who were—and some of them were passionately devoted to that antiwar movement, and they would show up every Thursday afternoon with placards and sometimes noise-makers and bull horns and do everything they could to distract us. And, you know, they were shouting slogans like "Get out of Vietnam" and, you know, "Burn your draft card" and all those kind of things.

So on the one hand, it was almost—a lot of us that were in ROTC were not totally convinced of—it's not like we were completely brainwashed by the military perspective, although in fairness—it was, what, 1965 or '66, so what we know about Vietnam now we didn't know then, and so there was a lot of sense of, well, you know, "We are serving our country. We are answering the call. And you yahoos are draft dodgers."

And there was also a certain—I mean, it's almost sort of comical in retrospect, but that was a time, if you think back to the mid-'60s, when something as simple and as commonplace today as the length of your hair could be significant. And there were a lot of college students who just

almost as a signal of being away from home for the first time grew their hair longer. And the Beatles were popular, and it was just sort of a symbol.

And yet if you were in ROTC, they were very strict about having a military haircut, so no matter where you went on campus, every day of the week, everybody knew, “Oh, you’re an ROTC cadet,” which for a lot of undergraduates was onerous. They didn’t like that. And almost I think in response, a lot of the antiwar protesters intentionally grew their hair longer, so there became this fairly vocal confrontation on Thursday afternoons between these long-haired hippies and us, you know, shaved—we weren’t really shaved head, but we definitely had white sidewalls.

And sort of an interesting culmination to this whole thing: There was one student who sort of stood out as being the most passionate of all these antiwar protesters, and he was in my class, but I basically never had much to say to him because I just thought he was basically a long-haired hippie. And there was one situation—there was this really phenomenal athlete at Middlebury at the time. I’m blanking on his name, but it’ll come to me. [A.] Bayard Russ. And he was, like, an All-American goalie for the soccer team. Remarkable athlete. And he I think was in—he may have been in the [U.S.] Army, but he also may have been in the Marine Platoon Leaders Corps or something like that program [sic; U.S. Marine Corps Platoon Leaders Course].

But he was in the military, anyway. And he was not the least bit embarrassed about being in the military. He was proud of the fact that he was going to serve his country, and he was looking forward to going to Vietnam. And there was one day—I wasn’t there; I didn’t see the confrontation, but this long-haired protester who was so vocal was really in his face, and Bayard Russ lost it, and there was a real physical confrontation.

And I can’t remember exactly how it all ended up, but the sequel to the story is that Bayard Russ was killed in Vietnam within days of his arrival in Vietnam. And at my 25<sup>th</sup> reunion at Middlebury, they had a session—you know, just kind of a panel discussion about Vietnam and what Vietnam did to us as a class. And the room was packed. It was really surprising to me because somehow I just thought, *Well, it’s*

*something we all went through.* I never thought it was that big a deal.

One of the people who was there was this protester. And another person that was there was a classmate who had remained in the military and was a full colonel in the military at the time, while we were there at the reunion. And so the conversation goes back and forth, and, you know, at first it's sort of light-hearted: "Do you remember the drill sessions?" and "Do you remember"—and so on and so forth.

And then at one point, the guy who was a protester—I wish I could—I want to say his name was [Lawrence] "Larry" [E.] Raab, but anyway, he spoke, and everybody in the room was just absolutely silent because he said that he still felt guilty at the confrontation he had had with Bayard Russ and that he wished [his voice cracks with emotion] that there was some way he could tell Bayard that he just—[weeps]—he wanted to do something to prevent the kind of things that actually happened to Bayard from happening.

And this whole room at the 25<sup>th</sup> reunion was just silent, and a lot of us, who had been in ROTC, who always saw this guy as kind of a, you know, wing-nut hippie—all of a sudden we saw the depth of his commitment. And this other classmate, who was a full colonel, active duty full colonel in the military got up and went across the room and gave this other guy a hug. [He continues to cry.] And it was such a poignant moment of how 25 years after the fact, there's still all this—this sort of misunderstanding and acknowledgement that, well, we were all young at the time. We really didn't understand everybody else's point of view.

[Voice gets stronger.] You know, in retrospect, if you really got up 2,000 feet and got a good perspective on the thing, the most courageous student at Middlebury was that kid who came out every Thursday afternoon and protested, in spite of all of the jeers from the ROTC cadets and the persecution that he must have experienced every day walking across campus. And what we know now, certainly all of us that were there at that reunion, that had been in the military, have a totally different perspective on what he did.

I have a neighbor where I live in Thetford who was a Dartmouth graduate and who was involved in the activities here at Dartmouth, taking over Parkhurst [Hall], and I think—

I don't know all the details of it, but I know that it was—you know, it was a pretty serious incident. And he also spoke out—years ago, there were people in the community, in Thetford, that were determined to create a war memorial for Vietnam veterans, and he spoke up in a town meeting, and he said, "You know, if you want to memorialize people who participated in the Vietnam era, you may want to consider those who protested against the war." And, of course, that created, you know, a huge discussion in town.

The ultimate was that they all agreed, ultimately, on a memorial stone that just says something like: "In Remembrance." To me, it was a remarkable solution to what could have been a very contentious issue, but rather than dividing people, this friend of mine, who was a war protester, actually brought everybody together in a positive way.

So I don't think I ever was as adamantly opposed to some of the war protesters as some others, but I have come to regard many of them as truly heroic for adhering to their beliefs and their standards.

GEISMAR: So at the time, this opposition between the people in ROTC and the people protesting the war and kind of that lack of perspective that both sides had, do you think that that affected your feeling and your connection with your class and with Middlebury? They spend a lot of time nowadays, at Dartmouth anyway, trying to form a sense of class unity.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —a connection to home, almost,—

MORTON: Yes, yeah, yeah.

GEISMAR: —school equaling home.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: And do you think that with that contentious time—did that have any impact on your sense of connection to your class or to Middlebury? It seems like, kind of, with this perspective, it's changing, but at the time, in the years after, immediately after your service, immediately after your graduation—what was your sense of connection?

MORTON: Well, I suppose, like here at Dartmouth, the community is big enough so that you find smaller groups within the community that you really identify with. And when I was coaching the ski team, I know the ski team almost became a community in itself and that they would oftentimes do social activities together. Very often, when they got to a point where they had the option to live off campus, they frequently would rent a house, and several members of the ski team would live together in the house.

So I think that to some degree, that existed for me at Middlebury, that I was a member of the ski team, I worked in the dining hall, and that was almost like a fraternity, the people that all worked together in the dining hall. But I do have to say that in retrospect, I was not especially open-minded about these other students that at the time I viewed as misguided hippies. You know, I had a pretty strong work ethic, and I didn't have a lot of time to waste, and I worked in the dining hall, I was an English major, and I was on the ski team, on the track team in the spring. So there wasn't a lot of hanging around. There wasn't a lot of, "Oh, let's go down to the Crest Room [in the McCullough Student Center] and have coffee and talk." I just didn't have time for that. I didn't do it.

And so when I saw some of these other students that that seemed to be more of their pattern, more their lifestyle—I mean, I've seen some of these same—basically what appeared to me at the time as long-haired hippies just lounging around on the campus, it didn't reflect to me a very strong commitment. But I've learned to recognize that, you know, they may have had talents in other areas that I didn't see. And I think now I'm more convinced that that was true. I mean, some of these folks that I didn't give much credit to have gone on to become very successful in their careers and very creative and probably, in many cases, outstanding citizens. So I probably was much too harsh in my judgment at that time.

GEISMAR: Gotcha. And so that feeling of connection or community that you had with Middlebury—did you experience a difference sense of connection with the students at Dartmouth? You were mentioning earlier that the ski team in particular seemed to be a very close-knit group, and do you think that could have been indicative of kind of a, I suppose, a wider sense of unity and especially without that same stress of war

and division between support of war—I don't know if you had as much interaction with the rest of the Dartmouth student body, but—

MORTON:

Dartmouth. Yeah, I had peripheral connection with the [Dartmouth] Outing Club because at the time, we all operated out of Robinson Hall, and so although my major connection was with the skiers, obviously, you know, I got to be friendly with many Outing Club members that I would see in the building. And through the years, I became really good friends with a number of other coaches, so I would kind of get a glimpse into some of the other world—I mean, I've never been a huge fan of basketball, but I became a huge fan of a couple of the coaches, and we became very good friends. I became a huge fan of [Robert B.] "Bobby" Clark, who was a soccer coach here during the time I was here.

And so I got a little glimpse into some of the other sports. I had a great—you know, in trying to tie this together with your questions about the war and so forth—occasionally some of the skiers—we would frequently have these long drives, so if we'd go to let's say the St. Lawrence Winter Carnival at Lake Placid, New York—I mean, that's a four-hour drive, so oftentimes when we were driving back, everyone was tired. Some athletes would be sleeping. You know, it would not be uncommon for somebody to say, "Hey, Morty, what was it like in Vietnam?" or "What was it like being an infantry officer?" or "What was training like in Fort Benning?" And so sometimes they would just be curious about those experiences.

And I remember at one point during my coaching time here, the Hopkins Center Film Society [sic; Dartmouth Film Society at Hopkins Center for the Arts] was showing *Apocalypse Now*, and I hadn't seen that movie. And it wasn't that I hadn't seen it on purpose, but I just hadn't felt motivated to go see any of the movies about Vietnam. And it wasn't any huge issue. It wasn't like I was having flashbacks or getting all freaked out or anything. I just wasn't interested.

And a couple of my skiers came and said, "Hey, Morty, we're gonna go see *Apocalypse Now* at Spaulding [Auditorium]. Would you be interested in coming with us and then going out for a beer afterwards and talking about it?" And I said, "Yeah, sure." And that was—I remember that as being a really rewarding experience. And they were very curious to

know whether the movie reflected the situation at all accurately and, you know, how far over the top some of the characters were. And I can remember we had a great conversation afterwards for an hour or so, and it was a great opportunity to—because they were very focused on it. They definitely wanted to know. And that was a great connection.

GEISMAR: It certainly seems like a lot of—the war, itself, and a lot of the movies around the war—the war is just so multifaceted in its nature that I guess that desire—if there were a movie, say, made about MAT leaders in Vietnam, would you be more motivated to go see that movie to check whether or not it's accurate, or is it just kind of something where you experienced it and it was enough?

MORTON: Well, you've got it exactly right: It is remarkably multifaceted, and from my experience, although it's like you'd say looking through a straw, right? That was my experience in Vietnam. And if you think of however—I think it's well over a million American G.I.s served in Vietnam, and all of them are looking through a straw. Now, it's no exaggeration to say, not at all, that for some American G.I.s, Vietnam was an incomprehensible disaster and tragedy. I mean, you almost couldn't express it verbally, the horrors that they saw. And that's probably why a significant—you know, a higher percentage of our homeless people are Vietnam vets, why there's such, even still, such an issue with PTSD because it is just indescribably horrible for some.

On the other end of the spectrum, if you were fortunate enough to be assigned to some, you know, high-ranking officer's staff in Saigon or some other major city, it could have been—I mean, I wouldn't say paradise, but it could have been the best experience you had had in your life. You're surrounded by all these exotic, beautiful women that were just throwing themselves at you because you had money and you were a ticket for them. You had power because you were the general's aide or the colonel's aide. You had probably a relatively mundane job, relative security, and you were getting paid more than you'd ever dreamed of in the past, getting hazardous duty pay and high cost of living pay and all of these added-on pays. And it was exciting. Every day was exciting and interesting, different.

And so you've got these two extremes, and then everything in between. You know, some guys, like me, a little bit of

dicey, you know, high pulse time, some fairly boring time, some modest discomfort with the heat and the monsoon rains and the rats and the mosquitoes and leeches and stuff like that, but, you know, in the grand scheme of things not disastrous.

But, you know, how about these guys coming back realizing years after the fact that they were exposed to Agent Orange and they're, whatever, ten times more likely to have cancer and their kids are more likely to have cancer? I mean, just horrible stuff. So there's an unbelievable range of experiences.

GEISMAR: I don't suppose if I know, but did you ever have students on the ski team who were considering time in the service and would talk to you about that? And was there a different reaction to that than there may have been during the mid-'60s—you know, kind of after the war's calmed down, after—I'm trying to remember historically if we're gearing up for Korea [the war in Korea] or not by that point, but a very different landscape so far as wanting to be in the Army.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: And I guess what were those conversations like?

MORTON: Well, it's interesting that you bring that up because during the time I was coaching the ski team here, ROTC had been discontinued, you know, during the protests, whenever they were, the mid-'70s or late-'60s—I forget—should know. Anyway, I know that there was Naval ROTC on campus, but it was discontinued. There was sort of a quiet—you know, not at all secret but sort of a quiet attempt at bringing back ROTC on campus, but there was a certain amount of discussion about it, and there were some people that were strongly opposed: "Dartmouth shouldn't be in the business of training military people." There were others that were in favor of it, and I was one of the ones in favor of it.

But selfishly, I was in favor of it because I went to college at Middlebury, my last two years on an ROTC scholarship. And I thought, *There are going to be some capable applicants to Dartmouth that perhaps the only way they'll be able to attend is with an ROTC scholarship.* And there's another advantage that actually a friend of mine, who was on the biathlon team and *was* a Dartmouth graduate, pointed out to me. We were

all complaining about, you know, sort of the boredom or, I don't know, routine of the military in Alaska. And somebody had said something like, "You know, why don't they just discontinue all the ROTC programs and let all of the gung-ho guys from West Point—you know, if they want to be career military, let them be—take over?"

And this guy, this Dartmouth graduate said, "You stop and think about it a minute what you're suggesting." He said, "The one thing that keeps our military somewhat sane and balanced is ROTC officers who have a broader academic background, a broader perspective than just a strict military point of view. And they're the ones, the few of them that stay in the military, that add a measure of sort of deliberation and discretion and, you know, perspective."

And I couldn't deny that. I went to infantry officer basic with an entire cycle of lieutenants from West Point, Virginia Military Institute, and The Citadel. And it was—it was an eye-opening experience because almost—the impression I had, being a part of that group, was they all shared one objective, and that was to be the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. That was their—and whatever it took to get them to that objective, they were willing to do it. And I don't think we want our military operated that way.

So when these discussions came up about ROTC, reinstating ROTC, I went to the dean's office, and I said—and by the way, I have a very talented, capable applicant from upper New York State right now who has been offered an ROTC scholarship, and that's the only way he can come to Dartmouth. And this is a kid who will really help the ski team. And fortunately, the decision was made to reinstate the ROTC program. I think the first year they might have had six students. He was one of them. He was an outstanding skier. I think he was the captain or co-captain his senior year, of the ski team. He went on for a career in the military. He is now out of the military but a terrific individual, and I think he served the military well, and he certainly is a credit to Dartmouth, and he's also a credit to the military. So I'm a big—I'm a supporter of ROTC.

GEISMAR: And I don't mean to rush us through your time at Dartmouth, and if there's anything else—

MORTON: No, no, good.

GEISMAR: —you'd like to touch on, please, please let's go back, but—so, let's see, you were a ski coach from 1978 to 1989.

MORTON: Eighty-nine, correct. Good for you.

GEISMAR: Thank you. And after 1989, was that the year that you decided to start your own company doing trail design?

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: And can you tell me a little bit about the decisions leading up to your decision to start that own project?

MORTON: Yeah. Well, there were times when I felt like I would be perfectly happy being a Dartmouth ski coach for forever, for as long as I could, you know, get out in the wintertime and put skis on. But there was also a time when the college, in my view, was almost repositioning itself, and part of it was due to the sort of current leadership of the college, and for obvious reasons, given my background and orientation to the outdoors, I've always thought that one of the greatest attributes of Dartmouth, the thing that sets it apart from all the other Ivy League schools and most of the other colleges and universities in the country is its orientation to the outdoors, its rural location and the phenomenal assets of the [Second] College Grant and Moosilauke Ravine Lodge, some of these other parcels of land that are available for research for things like the Ledyard Canoe Club, the Outing Club.

I think that those are the features of Dartmouth—everyone recognizes that it's comparable in terms of undergraduate education to any of the Ivy League schools or Stanford [University] or Duke [University] or any of those highly-reputed schools, and in fact, I think a lot of people successfully make the argument that Dartmouth is better because the classes are actually taught by the professors; they're not taught by some graduate student assistant, you know, professors. And because it's not a big university—the Nobel laureates aren't off doing research or something—you actually interact with the famous and highly-regarded professors.

So everybody knows that. That's no secret. But what *is* the secret, or at least not presented as effectively as it should

be, is that Dartmouth has this remarkable orientation toward the outdoors that the other places—you know, Harvard—okay, Harvard has a cabin up in the White Mountains, and I don't want to—a lot of schools—I mean, Yale [University] has a forestry school, for crying out [loud]. Why doesn't Dartmouth have the best forestry school in the nation? To me, it makes total sense. And you could be proud of it.

And what I was experiencing unfortunately, from a college administrative level, almost sort of an apathy toward the things that I felt were really important, the outdoor experience. You know, we had a couple of athletes during my years that were NCAA champions, routine Winter Carnival champions that then had earned a place on the World University Games team and offered the chance to compete I think it was in Czechoslovakia. At that time it was still Czechoslovakia. And granted, I totally agree, understand that it meant considerable time away from classes because, I mean, the schedules are demanding, especially in terms of the NAAs and then these World University Games.

But all of the professors approved, supported the experience. The students were all highly motivated students. They were doing well. But when they returned from that trip, I was called—I mean, basically summoned before the faculty committee on athletics, to try to justify their absence from these classes, even though the professors had all approved it. And they really—you know, they really read me the riot act about, you know, “This isn't just an athletic factory.” And I tried to point [out that] “these are kids who had the opportunity to travel, all expenses paid, to Czechoslovakia. In what other educational context would an opportunity like that be turned down? And, by the way, if you look at these particular students' academic records, they are far above the class average of everybody who *didn't* go. So what's the problem?”

And, you know, it just was—rather than the college celebrating the fact that these students were so capable that they could maintain the demanding Dartmouth academics *and* still compete and win at the NAAs *and* earn a trip to Czechoslovakia to represent the United States, we were getting called on the carpet for it. And it was just one of a number of incidents where I said, *I am just out of step with the current philosophy.*

And, you know, I basically—when it came time to renew my contract, I said, “You know, there are some things that I feel like we should do to improve the ski team, and here’s a list of what I think should happen.” And my boss at the time said, “We’re not gonna follow those things. We’re gonna continue as we have.” And I said, “Okay. Thanks. I think it’s time for me to go.”

And [chuckles] so to me, it was all equitable, you know, but—and, I will say, you know, with some irony, many of the suggestions I made were instituted after I left, and I had the highest regard for the coaches that are currently coaching the ski team. And, in fact, they are still here. They’re—Ruff Patterson replaced me, and Cami [Thompson Graves] came in right at the same time, and I think they’ve done a remarkable job, been very successful.

GEISMAR: Wonderful. And in making that move forward to going from kind of being in the academic setting to starting your own business,—

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: —I guess were there any connections that helped you along the way? Were there any Army connections that you used at the time, or was that something that’s been popping up a little bit more recently?

MORTON: Well, you know, there’ve been some—certainly there were connections—the Nordic ski world is a small world, and basically everybody knows everybody else. And so once I started getting into this trail design work, it was constantly relying on connections I had made, either years ago as an athlete or through the biathlon program or as the coach at Dartmouth. You know, I was fortunate in that during the time I was here at Dartmouth—in fact, all of that correspondence I told you about to ski clubs and coaches—those are direct links that I was able to reconnect once I started designing trails.

GEISMAR: Excellent. And I guess at this point in the interview, John, I’d like to ask: Are there any other points that you’d like to go back to that I’ve missed? It’s been an absolute pleasure thus far,—

MORTON: Thank you.

GEISMAR: —and I don't want to miss anything.

MORTON: No, I think you've done a great job with this, and it makes me very interested to perhaps take advantage of some of the other interviews that your colleagues, other students have—I mean, I think this is going to be a wonderful resource for not only students but community members that may end up at some point having an interest in Vietnam and the impacts that it had. Plus, as you get more and more of these, it'll be very interesting to see if certain patterns emerge, whether people are becoming, you know, more accepting of—certainly, my experience was I did not have much use for the war protesters at the time, during my college years. I have a totally different view of them now. And that's probably a good thing.

GEISMAR: And we just need to see if that viewpoint is something that continues going with more of the interviews now and I guess as more of the wars are continuing. We have Korea, we have the Gulf War, we have Iraq and Afghanistan that we're kind of just ending with now.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: It'll be interesting to see how these resources change and whether or not patterns exist across the board.

MORTON: Yeah.

GEISMAR: Well, I think this will probably be a great place to end the interview. John, thank you so much for your time and for your generosity.

MORTON: My pleasure. You did a great job with this, Brad.

GEISMAR: Thank you so much. Thank you so much.

[End of interview.]