

Jim Smith '68
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Karen Navarro

LIBRE: My name is Matthew Libre ['21], and I'm joined here today by Jim Smith. The date is January 28th, 2020, and we are conducting this interview over the phone with the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. I want to start here by saying thank you so much for being here with me today, Jim. It's a pleasure to have you.

SMITH: You're welcome. Looking forward to it.

LIBRE: Yeah. And I wanted to, yeah, I guess to start, can you tell me where and when you were born?

SMITH: April 5, 1946, Norfolk, Virginia.

LIBRE: And did you grow up in Norfolk?

SMITH: No. I moved away from Norfolk when I was 18 months old. I have no memory of it. My father was in the Navy, so we... He was a Naval officer, a US Naval Academy graduate, 1940. So, we moved around a lot the first, I don't know, 10 or 15 years of my life.

LIBRE: And can you describe that growing up situation? Can you tell me anything else about your family? Did you have any siblings? Anything else?

SMITH: Yeah, let's see, my father was from Utah, my mother was from Boston. I have two sisters, both younger than I am. One is three years younger and one is 14 years younger. And let's see, I've lived in Norfolk, Virginia; Bremerton, Washington; Washington, DC; Detroit, Michigan; Boston, Massachusetts, to name a few.

LIBRE: Right. And so this was all because your father was in the Navy, he was moving around a lot? Was he getting stationed in different places?

SMITH: Part of it was, and part of it was because he became a business executive after he left the Navy, and we continued to move around. After my father left the Navy in the mid-'50s,

he went to work for Chrysler's missile division and participated in the design and manufacture of the Redstone Jupiter, Jupiter-C missiles, and finally the first stage of the Saturn missile that was the rocket that took the man to the moon.

LIBRE: Really? Wow.

SMITH: Yeah, he was the president of the Saturn First Stage Project for Chrysler Corporation.

LIBRE: And, so that must have been a large part of your growing up, I'm sure. How did you feel like that impacted your growing up?

SMITH: Probably not much at all, I mean, other than the fact that, you know, I mean... Yeah, I don't really have a heck of a lot of memory of it other than my father would occasionally bring home pictures that were taken of tests performed on first stage rockets in Huntsville, Alabama, where they would fire up these rockets and see if they would perform properly or blow everything up.

LIBRE: And did this—I mean, this must have been particularly salient at the time, I'm sure that the—I guess that you were young, but I guess politically at the time, the space race, and then obviously that was very much a part of that time period? I mean, I'm sure that was especially a part of, to some degree?

SMITH: Yeah, I think that's fair. Later on when I joined the Army, I asked my father one time, I said, "Hey, Dad, how come Chrysler Corporation always got the contract for the low tech end of the rocket?" And he looked at me and he said, "Help me understand this. You're in the goddamned infantry and you want to know which end of my rocket is low tech?"

LIBRE: [laughter] That's great. Wow, a good sense of humor there. So can you explain—you talk about, I guess you were moving around a lot, but can you talk about elementary school, high school, what you were involved with?

SMITH: I moved around a lot, and so I suspect that that had some impact on the socialization process, because when you're the new kid on the block all the time, you sort of become self-sufficient. I wasn't what I would call a classic scholar. I

mean, I did well in school, but I wasn't interested, frankly. So, the astonishing thing is that I managed to get into Dartmouth and nobody to this day knows exactly how that happened. [laughter]

LIBRE: Stars were aligned.

SMITH: You know, I enjoyed... I wasn't a good athlete, so I gravitated fairly quickly to the swimming pool, where I found I had some ability athletically, so I became a swimmer. And pretty much I would say that my secondary school career was fairly unremarkable. But, anyway, I can't think of much else to say about it.

LIBRE: No, no, that's perfect. So, I guess, in your secondary school growing up, what attracted you to Dartmouth initially?

SMITH: My mom was from the Boston area and she always had a fondness for Dartmouth. And to me, of the Ivy League schools, it was the one that seemed to me to just be the most attractive. You know, as I say, I pretty much went to school in my spare time, which back in the day at Dartmouth, it was a sort of an *Animal House* environment to which I very readily took. [laughter] And let's put it this way, I suspect the education you're getting at Dartmouth is a hell of a lot different than the one we got.

LIBRE: That's interesting. [laughter]

SMITH: Well, and I mean, I think that it's to the credit of the institution that they have rocketed themselves into the 21st Century by doing such amazing things as going co-ed and such.

LIBRE: Right. Yeah, obviously you predated...

SMITH: Yes, I did.

LIBRE: Yeah. Can you describe that a little bit? So, just for I guess our keeping track of things, does that make you, were you a part of the class of '66 or '68?

SMITH: '68.

LIBRE: Okay, yep, '68. So yeah, can you describe a little bit sort of what it was like at Dartmouth, the atmosphere in general?

SMITH: You're asking me to go back more than 50 years, so, you know, what I remember is a small fraction of what I've forgotten. But, yeah, I mean, it was an all-male institution, and as such it was sort of rough and ready, but with an intellectual bent. You know, I mean, we'd go to school during the week and then blow it out on the weekends pretty much. And as the years went on, I spent more time blowing it out and less time going to school, so, I mean... I remember my father showed up one time to my fraternity, I think it was my sophomore year, maybe my junior year, I can't remember which, and he'd never been in a fraternity house because he went to the Naval Academy and they didn't have any fraternities. And after a particularly inebriate weekend, he looked at me through bloodshot eyes and said, "Well, son, I can see you go to school in your spare time." He said, "In fact, if I was here, I probably would, too." [laughter]

So, I mean, I will tell you this, I was not a serious student. I just wasn't. I probably didn't have any business going to Dartmouth and I would generally say that the educational opportunity that Dartmouth presented was largely wasted on me, and whatever I learned at Dartmouth was primarily through osmosis. So, yeah, I was not a serious student.

LIBRE: Yeah, and can you describe what the political environment was at the time?

SMITH: Well, my sense is that it was considerably more conservative than it is now. But, I don't know how else to describe it. I mean, we didn't have the *Dartmouth Review* or whatever it is now, which is some conservative... I mean, I don't know, is the *Dartmouth Review* still up there?

LIBRE: Yep. It's still around.

SMITH: Is it essentially an antediluvian, highly conservative publication?

LIBRE: It certainly leans, yeah, it leans a lot farther right is what I would say.

SMITH: Well, we didn't have that at the time, but my guess is that the attitudes of the student body in general, although they were as varied as the population of America in general, I would say that Dartmouth was the least liberal of the Ivy League schools, and I would guess that it probably wasn't close for

second place, which is probably the reason why Dartmouth was the last of the Ivy schools, I believe, to go co-ed.

LIBRE: Yeah, it was sometime after you.

SMITH: Yeah. That happened, I want to say, about three years after I graduated.

LIBRE: Right. Not too far out, but obviously it's certainly a defining aspect of anyone's experience prior to that date. And I guess in line, with that in mind, can you talk a little bit about what were your first memories of the United States' involvement in Vietnam, whether it be at home or politically at Dartmouth, or discussions? Well, what's your first memory?

SMITH: Hum. Well, I would say nothing specific comes to mind, but I was in general aware of... I mean, I don't think I was particularly affected by the war until it became a public issue, which was probably, I don't know, '67. I think the war initially enjoyed a certain amount of public approval, although I suspect most people couldn't find Vietnam on a map if you put it in front of them, and I think that their knowledge of what was going on over there was probably pretty minimal. But I think that most Americans back then generally supported the war effort, not because they knew what they were supporting, but because they supported America, you know, and in America this is what the leaders in American foreign policy wanted us to do, and so the Americans generally supported it. Obviously, that support eroded over time, and I think by the time 1967 rolled around, and certainly by early '68, not only had public opinion eroded on the subject of Vietnam, I think it had largely, at least in large sectors of the population it had evaporated.

And I mean, you know, I don't think I had any illusions about Vietnam going into the Army. I knew it was a bankrupt policy. I knew that we were probably embarked on what amounted to be a very costly fool's errand, because in effect we really didn't have any business being there. But it bothered me that so many of my classmates cloaked themselves in some sort of moral authority and essentially said they were going to wash their hands of having anything to do with the Vietnam War, and that bothered me because to me that meant some other poor son of a gun was going to have to take their place. And these were all people at Dartmouth who had enjoyed all of the blessings and gifts that the American way

of life could confer, and yet when it came time for them to pay the price for that, they elected not to. And, you know, that bothered me. I guess I should just leave it at that.

LIBRE: And I know you had mentioned—before we get into your actual, your role in the Army and how you ended up there, can you describe a little, was there certain divisions across campus between certain groups where some were more opposed to the war and some were... I mean, for example, you mentioned you were a part of a Greek organization. Was that—that was by no means a political entity, was it? Or was there a divide across those lines?

SMITH: Are you saying that was I a member of a fraternity? The answer is yes.

LIBRE: Yeah, I'm just trying to get a gauge of politically around campus, were certain groups, did they have a higher affinity towards being opposed to the war versus pro-war at the time?

SMITH: I don't think there was a heck of a lot of discussion about that until, I would say, the fall term of my junior year, maybe senior year. I remember a bunch of us got in a car and went down to Washington in November of 1967 to attend a protest rally. I don't remember the name of it, but it was something like "Confront the warmakers in Washington" or something like that, and we all stood around the Lincoln Memorial and listened to a bunch of people speak against the war and the war effort. And I remember being there. And the irony, of course, is that a year-and-a-half later I was in the Army.

LIBRE: How did you find yourself there?

SMITH: How did I find myself where?

LIBRE: In Washington at the rally?

SMITH: Well, at that point I was opposed to the war. But, you know, I mean, I don't know how... I mean, there's a part of me that says I went to this protest because it was a road trip, as opposed to something I felt really strongly about. I think it's probably fair to say that my political beliefs were still very much in the process of forming and still relatively confused. So I think I went to Washington as much to just see it as I did because of some fervent belief I had in what was going on

down there. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's the best response I can give you.

LIBRE: Oh, yeah, absolutely. And did you—obviously, your father had gone to the Naval Academy, he had served.

SMITH: Yes.

LIBRE: When—was there at any point in your life that you felt that you wanted to do the same?

SMITH: Yes, there was. Not because he served, but there just came a point... I mean, you know, obviously, to summarize that part of my lifetime I guess would be to say I think, you know, both in terms of my thinking and my politics and my sense of direction, I was in a state of confusion for probably a couple of years. My time at Dartmouth was sort of the typical *Animal House* type existence which, you know, I mean most of us majored in skirt chasing and alcohol abuse. And, so I'd have to say I graduated from Dartmouth without any real sense of vision.

And I initially went in the Peace Corps and was training on the island of Hawaii to become an elementary school teacher in the Philippines, and the training consisted of learning how to be a teacher, learning the language, and then learning about the culture we would be entering. And it was a pretty intensive program, and about halfway through the program, we had a weekend off to sort of like, almost like liberty, so we all went... And in Peace Corps, you have to hitchhike because they don't allow you to own or operate a vehicle. And we hitchhiked with the wrong guy. We got in a truck wreck, and so I fractured one of the vertebrae in my spine, and essentially mustered out of the Peace Corps for medical reasons, and six months later I enlisted in the Army.

LIBRE: Obviously, there's a lot that you just said there. Can you explain just briefly how you got involved in the Peace Corps itself? Is that something that you felt inspired to? Was it something that you felt was a service that you wanted to do for some reason or another? How did you end up there?

SMITH: I think I had some idealistic thoughts about doing that. There's a part of me that says that the man upstairs decided that I'd be better off in the "War Corps" than the Peace Corps, and so He staged this accident and spared my life.

But I don't know that that's true. But, I think that, like I said, I was drifting in a lot of respects, I think as many people do when they are at that age. And so, it took me a while to sort of find my bearings and get on with the business of living life with a bit more direction. And I think that for me that experience began with the US Army.

LIBRE: So you came in that I guess that six-month interval, you healed obviously if you were able to enlist, physically, and did you in that time develop a firm resolve that you wanted to be a part of the Army, or was this something that you felt was an inevitability and that you wanted to be having the choice yourself then?

SMITH: I felt an obligation to serve, even though I had no illusions about the Vietnam War, as I have said. And I decided that if I was going to serve, because of my educational background it would make sense for me to be serving as an officer as opposed to as an enlisted man, because if I was going to make a contribution, I felt that part of that contribution would have been a decent quality of leadership. So I went to the usual basic training stuff, and then I went to Officer Candidate School. And after I went through Officer Candidate School, it was apparent to me that the Army had not trained me sufficiently to be a platoon leader in Vietnam, which was clearly where I was headed. So I signed up for Ranger School, and graduated from the Rangers, and that was the best training I received in the Army, and it was superb training and it was very good. And I think it significantly enhanced my ability to handle the responsibilities of a platoon leader in Vietnam in the infantry, and it made all the difference.

LIBRE: Can you sort of bring me through when you first got into basic training, where were you?

SMITH: I started out at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and I had basic training there and what they call advanced infantry training there. Basic was two months and AIT was two months, and that was all done at Fort Dix.

LIBRE: And can you bring me through sort of a day-to-day experience? You get out of bed there, what would your day be like at basic training?

SMITH: Well, basically it was pretty much non-stop harassment punctuated by periods of instruction. Basic training was designed to take all of the civilian out of civilians, and break them down to the point where they became part of a team, which is to say part of an Army unit. It was designed to function as a team. And that process is something that the Army is very good at. And basically, so you get people who show up with hair down to their ass, wearing civilian clothing of all sorts and sizes and stuff, and, you know, very quickly you don't have any hair left and you're all wearing the same clothes, and you're all doing the same things. And it's an enormously educational experience in the sense that you are thrown in with a bunch of people from completely different walks of life, people that in an ordinary circumstance you would probably never see or spend any significant amount of time with. And yet you're all thrown in together and you are living a common experience, and there's something very binding about that. And it works. You know, the Army's good at that.

LIBRE: That's interesting to hear how you describe the Army's training and sort of bringing people together like that. How would you compare that to your education you had just a year prior, two years' prior, at Dartmouth?

SMITH: Well, it was completely different. But, then so were the purposes. I mean, I think the educational experience that I got at Dartmouth was largely a byproduct of all the partying and carrying on we were doing, because as I say, we really did go to school in our spare time. I was not a serious student, and so, while I had a very good time at Dartmouth, I wouldn't say I profited from the educational experience much at all. But in the Army, well, in the Army it's different, you know. I mean, you're being trained; you are learning things that you are going to need to know if you want to stay alive, particularly if you're going to be exercising a leadership role.

LIBRE: And can you explain your path to—I know you spoke briefly about basic training, advanced infantry training, and then Officer Candidate School. Is that...

SMITH: Yeah, Officer Candidate School was at Fort Benning, Georgia, and so was Airborne School and Ranger School, they were both headquartered at Fort Benning, as well. There's a school at Fort Benning called the US Army Infantry School, and that covers infantry OCS, it covers Jump

School, it covers Ranger School, and a host of other schools all related to the conduct of infantry operations. And, so I spent the next roughly year at Fort Benning: six months at OCS, and then a month in Jump School, and about two months, a little more than two months in Ranger School, yeah, basically teaching you how to become an infantry officer, and a good one. And I went to Ranger School because I got out of OCS and felt like I did not have adequate training in the sorts of skills that an effective infantry officer needs to have if he's headed to a combat zone.

LIBRE: Did you feel that a lot of other people shared this opinion with yourself?

SMITH: I don't know. I never asked them. I was really—I mean, it was an individual decision I made because I felt that coming out of OCS I did not have adequate training to lead a group of 20 to 30 men in the jungles of Vietnam. And I was right, I didn't. And when I went to Ranger School, I learned a hell of a lot more in that nine week period than I did in the 180 day period I spent at OCS.

LIBRE: I know you had spoken about how you get thrown in with people from all different walks of life. Was that, did you feel that that was the same experience you had in Officer and in Ranger School?

SMITH: I would say yes, but to a lesser extent. In other words, when you go to basic training, you're in there with everybody else, and the only thing that really binds you all together is the fact that you all got drafted or enlisted at the same time. But there's no winnowing process in basic training or AIT; it's something every soldier goes through at the beginning of their time in the Army. Obviously, OCS, Officer Candidate School, is a somewhat more elite selection process. In other words, in order to be a candidate to go to Officer Candidate School, you have to be a college graduate. Many of the people I went through basic training with were not. Many of them had not finished high school. And they came from all economic and sociological walks of life, you know, very different... So, you met people that you in your first 22 years of life had not had occasion to spend any significant amounts of time with, you know, folks from the Bronx or Spanish Harlem or Paducah, Kentucky.

I mean, I was a typical suburban kid who lived in a suburb outside of Boston, and I went to schools that had almost no African-American students. And indeed, even when I went to Dartmouth, there were very few, very few. I mean, in my class in 1968 I'd be surprised out of a class of 800 if there were 20 African-Americans in the class. So, you know, I lived a sort of elite privileged lifestyle before I went in the military, and when I went in the military I discovered exactly how the other half lives, because I was part of them.

LIBRE: How did you—what was your reaction to that? Was it...

SMITH: Well, it was very eye opening, in a good way. I mean, I realized—I don't know, have you ever seen the movie, *Platoon*?

LIBRE: No, I haven't.

SMITH: Well, you ought to see it.

LIBRE: Can you tell me about it? Yeah.

SMITH: Charlie Sheen plays a kid who's drifted through college, drops out of college because he isn't getting anything out of it, and he enlists in the military and shows up in Vietnam as a private. And he's attached to an infantry unit, part of the 25th Infantry Division. And there is a scene where he has guard duty, they're out in the middle of the jungle, out in the middle of nowhere, and he is in dialogue dictating a letter to his grandmother, and he's talking about the people he's serving with and he says, "They're from the ends of the earth, Grandma. They're from Paducah, Kentucky, and Amarillo, Texas, and Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and the Bronx in New York, and Queens." And he said, "They're at the bottom of the heap and they know it." He said, "They're the heart and soul, Grandma, and the best we have." It is an extraordinary scene, and it is so true. The guys I served with in my unit in Vietnam for the most part had very little to expect out of the American way of life, and yet they fought for their country when their country gave very little back to them. I was very impressed with them. And that movie, I think, you know, whatever other flaws that the movie may have had, and it had many, it captured that sentiment very well, the idea that, you know, these guys were the salt of the earth, at the bottom of the heap in an economic or sociological standpoint, and yet they were the best of us.

LIBRE: Did you feel that, I guess you sort of intimidated this prior, that your experience together in the Army helped to level that out in some respects, at least while you were there?

SMITH: Level it out in what respect? I'm not sure I understand you.

LIBRE: I know that these people, as you said, that America hadn't given much to them, and they had very little to expect of their country if they still served, and that they were on the bottom of the heap, as you said, in a lot of ways, socioeconomically. Did you feel that at least on base or when serving that some of these factors which had hindered their existence prior was leveled out so that everyone was on an equal playing field?

SMITH: Well, in terms of what we did, I mean, when you're talking about our operations as infantrymen in Vietnam, it was a very equal system in the sense that everybody endured the same privations, everybody had to do all of the same tasks for the most part. It was a shared and common experience, and so in that sense we were all one and the same. The only difference I would say is that as the platoon leader I had certain functions that only I could perform because I was the only one in the unit who was trained to do them, things like knowing where we were on the ground at all times, being able to call in air support and coordinate that air support if we needed it, maneuvering the unit around if we wound up in contact with the enemy. Those were things that most of them didn't have the training to know how to do.

But in terms of digging your own foxhole every night and sleeping on the ground and moving through the woods, and doing all those kinds of things, those were all things that we did in common, we shared in common, because we all went through them day to day every day. So in that sense, it was a very equal experience, equally bad basically, but it was an experience we all shared. And I don't know if that answers your question, but that's my response.

LIBRE: That's great. Can you take me from your Ranger School training, tell me are there any notable experiences, anything from training, any exercises, anything to you that stood out in your time in Ranger School?

SMITH: Yeah. Let me basically explain to you what Ranger training consisted of at the time. It broke down into three parts. The

first part, which lasted about three weeks, was at a place called Camp Darby, which is part of the Fort Benning military reservation, but it's away from the hustle and bustle part of Fort Benning. And the Rangers basically, they teach you how to conduct patrolling skills. In other words, an infantry unit operates at the basic level, and what its primary function is is to patrol a particular area of operations to find and engage with the enemy, and that requires the development of certain what they call patrolling skills, where you learn how to move through the jungle or the woods, whatever kind of terrain you're in, in certain different kinds of formations, some of them just moving one behind the other—it's called a ranger file—and then sometimes you'd get on line because you were going to cross an open area or you were going to attack a particular objective.

And throughout Ranger School, all nine weeks of Ranger School, they would constantly rotate the leadership positions. So, you'd have a squad sized unit or a platoon sized unit, or even a company sized unit occasionally, squad being about, say, 10 guys at the most; a platoon being 30 at the most; and a company being as many as a hundred. And they were constantly rotating the leadership positions among the various Ranger students. So, you never knew when you were going to get called on to be the patrol leader or a squad leader or whatever. And by the way, you're getting one C ration a day and virtually no sleep. And I think we had like—we averaged it out to something like an hour-and-a-half sleep a night, but you didn't get that every night. You got that like once every three days. And throughout the whole time, you are constantly engaged in infantry operations of one sort or another, whether it be patrolling or an attack or a reconnaissance or an ambush, and you would get trained on how to do all these things.

And as I say, they broke it down into three separate parts. The first part was at Camp Darby where you focused on the basics of patrolling skills, learning how to properly read a map, learning how to do what they call compass and pace, where you navigate without the benefit of a map; all you have is a direction and a distance. You learn basic weapons training and you learn how to call in artillery, how to call in helicopter gunships, all of the basic things that an infantry leader needs to know how to do. How to maneuver troops in the woods. These are all things that you have to learn how to do. They were mostly things that we did not adequately learn

in OCS, in Officer Candidate School, so that's why I went to Ranger School.

The first part, as I say, was at Camp Darby. That was the first three weeks. The second three weeks was in a place called Dahlonega, Georgia, which is up in the mountains in the north part of Georgia. And there we learned what they call long range reconnaissance patrolling, we learned rock climbing and rappelling, we jumped out of helicopters at night, and learned a host of those kinds of skills, primarily relating to reconnaissance missions.

And then the third phase of the Ranger training, remember you're still getting about an hour of sleep a night, not every night, but on average, and you're getting the one C ration a day. I lost 20 pounds in Ranger School and I was one of the people who lost less weight than most people did. But, the third phase was in Florida. The Rangers had a Ranger camp on Eglin Air Force Base, which is in the Florida Panhandle near Panama City, Florida, and not too far away from Pensacola. And there you learned guerilla and counter guerilla warfare techniques and platoon sized operations. And this was done in the swamps of the Florida Panhandle. And that was pretty much the phase that separated the sheep from the goats, because by then you'd been in Ranger School for six weeks, you were tired, you were hungry, and the missions generally speaking were more challenging and they lasted longer.

I remember one time I was the patrol leader for a mission that lasted 24 hours, and I had to stay awake, and more to the point, kick everybody else in the fanny to make them stay awake because they were—the pressure was off them; they were no longer in leadership positions at that point. So, they would be asleep on their feet, and you might have to conduct an ambush or an assault on the target, whatever. And they had all of the—these were very realistic operations. This was not some game.

I remember one time we had to paddle little Navy rafts down the Yellow River into the Gulf of Mexico where we were picked up by a landing craft called an LST [Landing Ship, Tank], and the landing craft then steamed around into the Gulf of Mexico, and we conducted an amphibious assault on a beachhead, and then marched all night through the swamps to attack an objective about two miles inland from

the beach. And that whole operation took about 24 hours, and I had to lead it.

So I mean, it was excellent training. I mean, when I got to Vietnam, you know, the truth of the matter is life in Vietnam was a hell of a lot easier than it was in Ranger School, because we ate three meals a day, we got 12 hours of sleep at night because in Vietnam the sun goes down at 6:00 p.m. and it doesn't come back up again until 6:00 a.m. So, when the sun went down, you went to sleep. And the only thing you had to get used to was the notion of getting shot at. But, all of the sort of living conditions in Vietnam were much easier than they were in Ranger School, which was intended. I mean, you know, it was a smart program in that respect, because instead of having to worry about adapting to the conditions in Vietnam, you know, they were a piece of cake. All you had to do was learn how to adapt to the enemy.

LIBRE: Can you describe the psychological impact of your Ranger School training? What about—were you a different person coming out of it?

SMITH: I think so, in the sense that, I mean, Ranger School at bottom is a leadership confidence course, and it is designed to give you the confidence to be an effective leader by giving you the skill set that you need in order to be able to perform those duties effectively. And so, yes, that was very useful. And yes, you come out of Ranger School thinking you're invisible and bullet proof. The truth is you are neither, but you believe you are.

LIBRE: Right. Can you describe going from Ranger School, the timeline of going from Ranger School to then actually getting on a ship and heading over?

SMITH: Well, we didn't get on a ship. By then they had gotten more efficient about it, and so we got on board an airline that was chartered to fly from Fort Dix, New Jersey, all the way to Vietnam. I remember the flight took about 22 hours, and we flew and stopped in San Francisco, and then Fairbanks, Alaska, and then someplace in Japan, and then finally to Vietnam. The whole flight took basically a whole day, 24 hours—22 hours. And I landed at Tan Son Nhat Air Base, and was assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division, and reported for duty at the 1st Cavalry Division's division headquarters

which is in Bien Hoa, about 40 miles north of Saigon. And was given some in country training for a couple of weeks, mostly designed to just acclimate you to what's going on and all that. And then, I got on a helicopter and was taken to the unit that I was going to take over. That's a day I'll never forget.

LIBRE: Yeah. Can you describe—I absolutely want to hear about that, but can you describe when you first arrived in Vietnam, what were your first impressions of being there?

SMITH: It was hot. It was very hot and humid. It was—I mean, there were a lot of—it was a smelly area. I mean, in other words, you were immediately sort of hit by the odors because they don't have proper sewage, they don't have trash removal, so there was a lot of just debris everywhere. And when you got to the base, obviously things were a lot cleaner. But, yeah, I don't remember a hell of a lot about it, to be candid. I mean, it was just a new place.

LIBRE: Culturally, were you interacting with any Vietnamese people when you first arrived?

SMITH: No. When I was there in the Army, the Army was broken up into two distinct halves. There was an outfit called US Army Republic of Vietnam, and that consisted of a host of American divisions: the 1st Cavalry Division, the 101st Airborne Division, the 25th Infantry Division, the Big Red One, the 1st Infantry Division, the 4th Infantry Division. Yeah, like I say, a number of military units. Those units operated in what were known as free fire zones, which meant you were away from civilization for the most part, and if it moved, you could shoot it. The other half of the Army was called the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, called MACV, and that consisted of Special Forces, advisors to the ARVN units, ARVN being Army of the Republic of Vietnam. In other words, South Vietnam had its own army, and we had a number of military advisors who were embedded in the South Vietnamese units. And they tended to operate in populous areas with lots of Vietnamese civilians around.

And we had very little interaction with the Vietnamese, except on a couple of occasions. And as I say, once I got to my unit, I think I got back to the rear echelons twice. So, I mean, it was we spent most of our time in the jungle. And we

saw very little human habitation, except for the enemy himself.

LIBRE: Yeah, can you describe that? You said you were taken via helicopter, or I believe you said that, to where you were assigned, and that you would never forget that day. Can you describe it a little bit to me?

SMITH: Yeah. I'm wearing a pair of new jungle boots and new clean jungle fatigues, and I've got a brand new M-16 and some C rations and other things that, whatever I had in my pack. And so I... The unit gets resupplied every three or four days when they're out in the field, and that resupply is conducted by helicopter. So, I came out on a helicopter that was essentially engaged in resupplying the platoon I was about to take over. And everybody there was filthy dirty, covered with mud, and I show up in a brand new uniform, and I immediately felt completely out of place, and I thought, *Okay, I mean, this is what I've trained for the last year for. Tell me again why this was a good idea?* I mean, you know, there's bugs; you know, the bugs are big enough to pick you up and carry you away, and every time you sit down there's a different kind of bug right next to you. Yeah, it was... I mean, you want to talk about culture shock? I guess that was as cultural a shock as I've ever had. I mean, I was ready for it in the sense that I knew this day was going to come. So, I took it in stride, but it was still, I mean, that's an experience.

I think, looking back on it, I mean, I went around and shook everybody's hand and asked them who they were, and then pretty much kept quiet for about a month, because I wanted to just watch and see what the platoon sergeants in my unit, who were pretty much running it at the time, I wanted to see how they operated, and I didn't want to come in and pretend like I knew what the hell was going on when obviously I didn't know what the hell was going on, and it would take me several weeks to figure that out. And it did. So, basically what I did was pretty much stay silent and observe for the first, I don't know, three or four weeks. And then after that I began to take more of an active role in sort of running the unit.

LIBRE: Did you feel like your training adequately prepared you for that once you were in that role?

SMITH:

Yes. And I was lucky. I mean, when a new lieutenant comes to a unit, he is greeted with sometimes pretty open skepticism, in the sense that he's untried, untested. The men in the platoon know that they are utterly dependent on that lieutenant's skills and abilities, and that basically a good lieutenant can save their lives and a bad lieutenant can cost them their lives, and they know that. So, until you get yourself into a situation where you have to display those skills, in other words, until you run into the enemy and get involved in a sustained firefight, they don't have any way of knowing whether you're going to be any good at it or not. And I was fortunate in the sense that only a couple of weeks after we got there, after I got there, we ran into a reinforced NVA [North Vietnamese Army] platoon, and fortunately we got the drop on them, and killed about 15 of them before they even had a chance to react, and we fought for all of one afternoon and part of the following morning. And at the end of the day, we had killed a bunch of them and they hadn't killed any of us. And I think by then my guys knew that I knew what I needed to know in order to be effective.

Later on that morning, or that evening I should say, while the place was still—what do I want to say?—alive and hostile, the battalion commander called me up on the radio and wanted me to conduct a bomb damage assessment to determine how many enemy had been killed, etc. The sun was going down. The hostiles were still around. We were in defensive mode at that point. And I thought that it was hazardous to conduct that bomb damage assessment just so he could go back and tell his superiors how many people had died, and I refused to do it. And I basically told him, "If you want to conduct a bomb damage assessment, get your ass down here out of your safe helicopter and I'll give you the keys to the platoon and you can do it." Because I knew damned well he wasn't going to do that. And he was upset and all that, and that's okay. I was, too. I mean, it'd been a long hard day. And I felt like the mission we had conducted thus far was very successful because we had clearly won the battle, and while it was still ongoing—it was more skirmishing at that point—but I damned sure wasn't going to expose my men to danger just so he could know how many people we killed.

And he said, "Well, if wait until tomorrow, they'll be gone." I said, "Well, I don't care." I said, "So what? That's not what I'm out here to do. I'm out here to protect these men. I'm

gonna do that.” And I think that helped me in the sense that these men not only knew that I knew what I was doing, but that I was going to look out for their ass and make sure that they didn’t get taken advantage of by a bunch of field grade officer types who didn’t know their ass from a hole in the ground. Pardon my French. Well, anyway, I mean, now to this guy’s credit, he came up to me when we finally got back to the firebase a month later, and he came up and shook my hand and he said, “My name’s Easterling.” And I said, “How are you, sir?” And he said, “I’m fine and I want to apologize for bird dogging you in that mission you had three weeks ago.” I said, “Don’t worry about it, sir. We did fine.” And he said, “Yes, you did.” And after that I never had any trouble with him. I mean, he’d call up and say, “Is this Tiger 31?” I’d say, “Yes, sir.” He’d say, “Go get ‘em, Bub.” So, I mean, we had a good relationship. But, you know, he needed somebody to stand up for [to] him.

LIBRE: Now, can you describe the relationship that you had with the rest of the men in your platoon going forward after that? Was it markedly different?

SMITH: Well, I mean, it was different in the sense that they no longer had that lingering concern about whether or not I knew what the hell I was doing. I think when you are leading a unit like that, you can’t be buddy buddy with these guys, because there’s going to come a point in time when you’re going to tell them to do something they don’t want to do, and it’s going to be essential that they do it; and if you’ve been their buddy, it’s going to be a lot easier for them to say, “Screw it. I’m not doing that.” And, so you have to preserve a certain distance between you and your men.

And I don’t know, maybe other officers did it differently. But I think you have to find something that works. But you can’t be buddy buddy with these guys. You know, you’re there to lead them, and you’re there to make sure that... You know, you have two objectives as a leader. Your objectives are number one, to accomplish the mission, and number two, to look out for the welfare of your men. And those are co-equal responsibilities. They’re not—you’ve got to do both of them. One does not necessarily have priority over the other. So I mean, when you talk about what was my relationship with my men, I mean, it was pretty casual, but in the sense that you do have to keep a certain distance. Does that make sense?

LIBRE: Yeah, absolutely. Did you feel that you, in that role, did the duty that you wanted to? Did you feel that you were able to be the leader that protected—as you said in your words, you have two duties: to follow the mission and to protect your men. Was that, at the time did you feel like that was something that you were able to accomplish in that role?

SMITH: Yeah, I think so generally. Look, I came home from Vietnam with a chest full of medals, and some of them I could even tell you what the hell they were for. But, the thing I'm proudest of is we spent a year in the woods, had a lot of contact with the enemy over the period of time I was in the jungle, and every one of my men went home alive and in one piece. Every one of them.

LIBRE: That's wonderful.

SMITH: So that suggests to me that we were doing something right. And I don't take full credit for that, because I had a good platoon. They were well trained. And I had a hand in training them, but still they were well trained. And I felt like, you know, we... [both talk at the same time] Go ahead.

LIBRE: You mentioned some—a chest full of medals, you said. Can you describe any of the experiences that brought those to you?

SMITH: I received a Bronze Star award four times. You can get the Bronze Star for different things. I got one with what they call a "V" device, and I think the citation reads "for heroism in ground combat," and that was for the firefight I just described to you that lasted two days.

We had another mission where we'd just landed—let me explain how that works. The Army in infantry operations, in Vietnam at least, the hub of the operation is they operated in battalion sized units. A battalion is an organization that consists of maybe a thousand troops, half of whom are actually in infantry units that actually operate in the field. So you've got five infantry companies, and then you've got a bunch of people on the battalion staff who are attached to what they call a headquarters company. That battalion staff is on a firebase that has typically three artillery pieces on it, and those artillery pieces are designed to provide air support for an area around the firebase extending out about six or

seven miles. The infantry units operate within, that's called the artillery fan, that area around the firebase that's about six or seven miles in radius from the firebase to the outermost perimeter of the area. The infantry units operate throughout that area.

And essentially the firebases move all the time, and they don't move according to any sort of pre-arranged schedule. They move. You know, you might be on a firebase and it moves in, say, a week, and then you might be on another one for three months. And so, but they're out in the middle of nowhere. I mean, understand these firebases are out in the middle of the jungle, and all it is is a big clearing where the triple canopy rainforest has been cleared away, and you have the hootches and the tents that are on the firebase itself, and most of the people who are on the firebase are either battalion staff members or people who run the artillery, which is to say the three big guns that fire indirect fire to support the infantry troops that are out in the field.

We'd gotten into this area, and by the way, where I operated in Vietnam was right along the Cambodian border about a hundred miles north of Saigon, maybe 150 miles. There were a series of provinces in Vietnam that bordered Cambodia: Binh Long, Phuoc Long, Cai Ninh and one other. And so we operated there, and that was where the so-called Ho Chi Minh Trail came out of Cambodia and back into Vietnam. In other words, it started up in North Vietnam, and then went through Laos, and then down through Cambodia, and then exited into South Vietnam itself. I mean, when you say "a trail," that's a misnomer because basically it was a thousand trails, but they all generally operated in that geographic area. And our basic mission was what they called interdiction. Our job was to intercept enemy units that were coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Saigon, into the South Vietnamese area. That was our job.

But anyway, on this particular mission, we had just landed in a new area of operations, we'd only been there one night, and we got up in the morning and we heard—we were camped out on the top of an escarpment that overlooked a valley that was down about a hundred foot cliff right below us. And we woke up in the morning and we heard all these voices. And we had a Kit Carson scout with us, which was a person who spoke Vietnamese, who was either Vietnamese or Cambodian, and he said, "These people are not military."

They're civilians." And I said, "All right. Well, let's go ahead and put together a squad and go down there and find out who they are and what they're about."

Well, it turned out there were about 150 civilians that lived in this tiny hamlet out in the middle of nowhere, and they were being held prisoner by the North Vietnamese Army and forced by day to work in the rice fields to cultivate rice for the NVA Army, and then at night they were locked up in stocks so they couldn't escape. And so, we ran the NVA off, because they weren't prepared to fight a full-blown American platoon unit. And we put all these people, civilians, on helicopters; it took a whole day, and we airlifted about 154 people out of this area and back into a safe zone where they wouldn't be imprisoned by the enemy.

The interesting thing about that was that these people, I mean, they were country peasant types in Vietnam whose only desire was to be left alone, and they were caught in the middle between the United States Army and the North Vietnamese Army, and they were as frightened of each side as you would expect them to be. It was almost like, I don't know if you remember when—this is something that's probably before your time, but they built a large dam in southern Africa called the Kariba Dam on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe on the Zambezi River. The effect of building that dam was to create a huge lake, and a whole bunch of people who lived in that valley had to be relocated. But then when they actually built the dam and created the lake, there was a tremendous amount of wildlife that had to be rescued in order to make sure they didn't drown. And there was an operation called Operation Noah, where scientists and biologists and zoologists went over there and rescued these animals. Well, they were wild animals and they were frightened to death of being rescued. They didn't want to go jump in the boat. Well, it was the same thing with these people that we were essentially rescuing in Vietnam. I mean, they didn't want anything to do with us or the North Vietnamese Army.

Now, after we—you know, it took two or three days to get this operation completed, and I think there came a point in time when at least the leaders of this little hamlet became more comfortable with us and came to understand and believe that we weren't going to harm them in any way. But the people generally were just scared to death of us. They

were as frightened of us as they were the NVA, which was too bad.

LIBRE: Did they want to leave?

SMITH: No. They didn't want to leave, but they knew they had to. I mean, those people are, they're very much rooted to the ground. I mean, they are rooted to their land, and so the idea of being sent to some relocation camp where they would be essentially interned, probably much as we interned the Japanese American citizens during World War II, you know, I mean, that was not an appetizing prospect for them. But I don't think they knew anything about all that. All they knew was that they were having to leave their home place, you know, the place that they had been born in and lived in and expected to die in. And here we were uprooting them and putting them on a helicopter, which scared the hell out of them, and then sending them off to someplace that they'd never been before and they probably would never go back to. And whatever happened to them, I don't have any idea.

LIBRE: Yeah, did you have any idea of the conditions in the refugee camps where they were?

SMITH: No idea at all. Never saw them. Never saw them, never heard anything about it. But anyway, I got a Bronze Star for that for, I don't know, something like—hang on, let me... I've got it. I think I can tell you what it says on the document. I got a Bronze Star for "meritorious achievement in ground operations against hostile forces." That's what that was for. And I got one for alleged "heroism in ground combat," which I've already described to you.

LIBRE: And were you the only one awarded these, or was anyone else in the platoon given similar... As a leader, was this conferred upon you?

SMITH: It was conferred upon me. I believe some of my platoon sergeants got them, too. But you know, the Army, when it comes to issuing awards, it's like Morton salt, when it rains it pours. I mean, the truth of the matter is I had no idea that I had received any awards, and frankly didn't care. I mean, when you get finished with your year of tour of duty in Vietnam, they tell you to put on your dress green uniform, and they send you to a place called Awards and Decorations, and they put a bunch of medals on your

uniform, and off you go. I couldn't have told you what the hell they were for at all. And then they give you all of this paperwork to tell you what they are and, you know, you went home. Like I said, that didn't make much difference to all of us, and most of us didn't really care.

LIBRE: And were you in the same area the entire time? Were you on that Cambodian border for your entire tour?

SMITH: Yes.

LIBRE: And did your opinion of the Army, your understanding of the US's involvement there, did that evolve at all over the time that you were there?

SMITH: I would say no. I mean, basically, when you're in an infantry unit, you don't worry much about the geopolitics of the Vietnam War. You're there fighting for each other. And your objective is to go home, hopefully in one piece. So the politics of the Vietnam War, the morality of the cause and all that, we didn't give a damn about that. I mean, that literally, I mean, that was more of a factor when you were a civilian walking around on the streets, reading newspapers and such. You know, in Vietnam we didn't read a damned thing, and didn't care to. I mean, basically we had a job to do, and that job largely consisted of protecting each other. So you weren't fighting for country and flag. You were fighting for each other.

LIBRE: Did you find yourself isolated from the rest of the world, from friends, family at home when you were out, as you said, in the jungle and not reading the newspaper, with the one goal of keeping each other alive in mind?

SMITH: Yeah, I mean, like I said, the whole year I was over there, I only spent a couple of weekends in the rear, you know, and by the rear I mean Bien Hoa where the 1st Cavalry Division headquarters was. I think I got to Saigon once, and Bien Hoa once or twice, and that's in a whole year. The rest of the time we were out in the jungle, and the closest we came to civilization was being on a firebase, which ain't really civilization at all. I mean, you know, that's just a bunch of huts that the Army constructed to house the people who lived there, mostly artillery people. And so, you know, I mean, I guess I never really felt all that isolated, probably because I didn't think about it. I mean, I had a job to do and I

was there to do it. So I really didn't think much about that. I mean, the truth of the matter is is you don't really think about stuff like that in a place like Vietnam.

Now I'll tell you something. The places in Vietnam where we operated, the terrain and the foliage was staggeringly beautiful. I mean, Vietnam is a beautiful country. Not all of it, but the parts that we operated in. I mean, it was like triple canopy rainforest, and it was gorgeous.

LIBRE: Have you ever been back?

SMITH: No.

LIBRE: Has that ever crossed your mind?

SMITH: It has crossed my mind, but only to say, *Hell, no, I've already been there.* I mean, I don't have any desire to go back.

LIBRE: Can you flesh that out a little more for me? Why do you say that? What about it?

SMITH: I literally, I mean, it's kind of like *been there, done that, got the tattoo*, you know what I'm saying? I don't... I mean, there are some places on my bucket list that I want to see before I die, but candidly, Vietnam and the Indochinese Peninsula is not one of them. I've been there. You know, that's not an experience that I need to repeat, in that sense. I don't know how else to say that.

LIBRE: No, no, that's...

SMITH: It's not because of any... You know, look, I consider my experience in Vietnam to be one of the defining experiences in my life. I am glad I did it. But I have no desire to repeat it or relive it or anything like that. But it was, I think as much as anything else, it was the experience that caused me to become a grownup. My wife would dispute that. She would say I'm still not a grownup. Then again, who asked her? But I'm serious. I mean, I think that that was the first time in my life when I became responsible for others, and I think you do grow up when you have that responsibility put on your shoulders.

LIBRE: What was it like coming home?

SMITH: That was not good. I arrived in the San Francisco Airport with my brand new spanking uniform on, and some asshole with hair down to his ass and purple sunglasses on came up to me and spit on my uniform and he called me a sucker. Which caused him to go airborne without pay through a plate glass window, and then I dove through the window after him, and I probably would have killed him if a bunch of guys that were with me hadn't pulled me off of him and gotten me out of there. But, we were not—I would have to say the only thing the American people have learned from the Vietnam experience that has translated well into the experience with soldiers coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan is that even though all, the Vietnam War, the Iraq War and the war in Afghanistan have all enjoyed a great deal of controversy politically, the American people learned as a result of the Vietnam experience not to take it out on those who fought the war. The people from Iraq and Afghanistan who have fought there come home and are welcomed. We were not.

I remember for a period of about 10 years after I got back from Vietnam and mustered out of the Army, I did not list my Army experience on my resume because it was not considered to be a positive thing by the prospective employers. They thought we were all, you know, baby killing, village burning, drug addicted killers. So I guess I would have to say that I will never forget the reception I received when I came home from Vietnam. As I say, I almost killed a guy who spat on my uniform. Stupid idiot. That guy deserved to die because he was too fuckin' stupid to breathe. Pardon my French.

LIBRE: Did you feel betrayed coming back to that welcome?

SMITH: No. I felt disappointed.

LIBRE: Disappointed by—can you explain that a little more?

SMITH: I was disappointed in the American people in that they were unable apparently to separate their dismay over the politics of the Vietnam War from how they treated those who were called upon to fight that war. I mean, I thought any idiot ought to be able to tell the difference between somebody who served versus the guys who sent us over there.

LIBRE: Did you feel like many of the people that you fought alongside shared your opinion, or still share?

SMITH: Well, I don't know the answer to that because basically I came home, and basically it was 24 hours later I was a civilian. So, I mean, I never saw those guys again. So I don't know how they felt about how they were treated when they came home. I'm simply telling you that's how I was treated. And I have since talked with other people who were in the military at that time, not necessarily people I served with, but friends of mine now who also have a military background, and they have recited similar circumstances when they got back. And I mean, I watched Ken Burns' 10-part treatment of the Vietnam War. I don't know if you've seen that?

LIBRE: Yeah, I have.

SMITH: And there are parts of it I did not like at all, but the ending when they talk about the healing process that has taken place both in Vietnam and here at home, I thought that was superb. And there's one I remember where a woman who was apparently a very vociferous anti-war protestor, when they talked to her about that she says, "I regret deeply some of the things I said and did back then. I wish I could take them back, but I cannot. But I am so very sorry." I found that to be very touching, because I think there are probably some people who mistreated me when I came home who now regret that they did. You know, with the passage of time, raw nerves heal over and people begin to regain perspective about things.

And I'm delighted to see that our young men and women who serve in Iraq and Afghanistan are now much better received when they come home than we were. And that's progress. I'm glad to see that. I mean, it seems to me that that's probably the only lesson we have learned from Vietnam. I used to think we had learned a lot of lessons from Vietnam, and then George W. Bush sent us into Iraq and Afghanistan. Afghanistan initially might have been a worthwhile mission, but then mission creep turned it into a quagmire. And Iraq to me was a fool's errand from the start, as by the way was Vietnam.

LIBRE: Do you think having been a part of it has helped you gain these reflections of a different light?

SMITH: I don't understand your question.

- LIBRE: That having been a part of Vietnam has informed—having served and have actually been in the jungle, been in the midst of things, has informed the way you see modern conflicts such as Iraq, Afghanistan?
- SMITH: Oh, sure, yeah. I mean, I don't think—I don't see how you could not have it inform that. I mean, I think that, I personally believe that anyone who wants to be President of the United States should have served in the military, because that's the only way he's going to have a visceral understanding of the true cost of war. Colin Powell was the only member of the George W. Bush Administration who had outright combat experience, and he was the only one who said "this business with Iraq is a bad idea. We need to think this through." And [Donald] Rumsfeld and [Vice-President Dick] Cheney and the rest of these assholes who had probably all dodged the draft when they were young, yeah, they froze Colin Powell out, and the result was this frolicking detour we took in Iraq that turned into a complete shambles. So yeah, I think that my experience in Vietnam informs my view of subsequent military conflicts. Sure. How could it not?
- LIBRE: Do you feel that your time in Vietnam, I guess, even in the Army, that's informed how you view—I guess, I thought it was really powerful when you mentioned how it can bind people from different circles. Do you feel like it changed, your time in the Army and your time in Vietnam has currently affected and changed the way you see people from different backgrounds?
- SMITH: Absolutely. Yes. I mean, I think that, you know, I think one of the things that you come to realize is that while certainly we lead different walks of life and we come from different origins, and we experience differing levels of physical comforts that come with wealth, the fact is we have a lot more in common than we have that divides us. And one of the great deficits this country now has in my opinion is a total lack of leadership. And leadership is the ability to form consensus. In other words, real leaders, not like this asshole we've got in the White House now, but I mean, real leaders, you know, they bring us together. They form and forge a rough consensus, and they motivate people to pursue a common path, hopefully toward progress. None of that is happening now, and the reason is because we don't have any real leaders in either party, in my opinion. In the last election, I voted, but I did not vote for the office of President,

because in my opinion, for differing reasons, both candidates were flatly unacceptable. I have wandered off the reservation. That's not the question you asked me.

LIBRE: No, I think it's certainly all, I mean, as you said, I think you're expressing it that the lessons that you've learned and things that you've drawn from leadership skills and things that you had to have a common goal, have really helped you to understand what a leader is. And I think that's certainly important. I think the qualities...

SMITH: I think at bottom, a leader is basically a teacher. I don't know if you ever saw a movie called *Saving Private Ryan*?

LIBRE: Oh, yeah.

SMITH: Okay. I think that is a superb movie. I was never a big Tom Hanks fan. It seemed to me he always played sort of Casper Milk-toasty sort of characters. But then I watched him play Captain John Miller in *Saving Private Ryan*, and I thought to myself, "Son of a bitch, this guy can really act." I said, you know, to myself I said, *I'd follow that guy into hell, and if he told me to go to hell, I'd go.* I think that Hanks just absolutely nailed the role of a patrol leader, platoon leader. I mean, that's what he was. And, you know, I could really hearken to what he was doing as they encountered all of the various obstacles and adversities they encountered in their efforts to find and rescue Private James Ryan. But I thought it was—I mean, Hanks really did a wonderful job with that role, because he was the quintessential platoon leader. And at bottom, he was a teacher. You know, he basically, he led that platoon in ways to where he led by example, but he also in subtle, easygoing ways, he caused those people to come around to a point of view that he felt was in the best interests of the platoon as a whole. And that's what a leader has to do. It's not easy. But it is essential.

LIBRE: Did you ever talk with your father or share any experience with him from his experience having—he was in World War II, correct?

SMITH: Yes.

LIBRE: Did you ever speak with him about that?

SMITH: My father and I had a somewhat diffident relationship. Emotionally and temperamentally, he and I are very different people. My father was a sort of silent type who said very little and who really didn't know quite what to make of his son who was so different than he was. I am by nature a communicator. My father was not. I always had the sense that he disapproved of me, often because it was utterly justified, but we were just very different. And I think we didn't become close until shortly before he died. He had been diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer in I want to say April of 1987, and he had gotten himself sued by the Federal Savings and Loan's Insurance Corporation, the FSLIC, because he had guaranteed some loans that my stepbrother, who is a crook, had signed. And I won't bore you with all the details, but he was a defendant in a lawsuit brought by an agency of the federal government, and he called me up and he said, "I need your help." Well, my father had never called me up and said he needed my help for anything. So I said, "What would that be?" And he said, "I got sued down here and I've got a good lawyer but he's not a litigator like you are, and I'd like you to come down and help him try this lawsuit." And I said, "Sure." And as a result of that, I had to prepare my father to testify as a witness in the case on his own behalf. And that was the only time I ever talked with him about his experiences in the Navy.

He graduated in 1940 from the Naval Academy. He was an ensign on a heavy cruiser called the *USS Quincy*, which was one of four ships sunk off the coast of Guadalcanal, which is the reason why the 1st Marine regiment was marooned on the island without Naval gun support, because there were four heavy cruisers, all of which had been sunk in a Japanese ambush. And so my father and a whole shipload of others went over the side. My father was unhurt and was picked up in the morning by a hospital ship, but of the four heavy cruisers that were sunk, 1,100 men died. It was the worst disaster in US Naval history on the high seas. Only the debacle at Pearl Harbor resulted in more casualties.

And, so fast forward 30 years, and I'm in Vietnam on the Cambodian border, basically on both sides of the Cambodian border, but we're not supposed to say that, conducting infantry operations, and I get this letter from my dad and it says, "Dear son, how's everything in the mud? Back in the Great War (capital "G" capital "W") I had bacon and eggs for breakfast every morning and clean sheets to

sleep on every night. Hope all is going well for you in the jungle. Your loving father.” So I wrote him back and I said, “Dear dad, conditions here ain’t so good, but at least we’re still afloat.” [laughter] And I didn’t hear from him for a month. The next letter came, “Dear you impudent son of a bitch...” [laughter]

So anyway, I really didn’t have any experiences talking with my father about his war experiences. I mean, he described what happened, but, you know, I didn’t serve in the Navy. I served in the Army instead. And it’s very different, I think.

LIBRE: Yeah. Well, is there anything else that you’d—any other reflections that you feel like you’d like to share or any experiences that you feel like are really pertinent to your time in Vietnam today?

SMITH: Only that I would say this. Obviously, the US Army is a cross-section of the American population, and as such it has the same strengths and weaknesses as any other sector of the American population. But I will tell you this. Some of the finest men I have ever known were the people I knew and served with in the United States military. Their word was their bond. You didn’t have to get anything in writing, because if they told you they would do it, it was done. And sadly, my experience in 43 years of being a practicing lawyer, I find very few civilians of whom that can be said.

LIBRE: Thank you so much for sharing that. It’s been an absolute...

SMITH: I don’t know—you know, frankly, as I look back on what we’ve chatted about, I’m not sure I understand where all that takes us, but those are my thoughts and musings about the Vietnam War and my experience in it.

LIBRE: And that is exactly what we want.

SMITH: And I will tell you this. I did not have any illusions about our function in Vietnam. I really did think that this was... Had John F. Kennedy lived, I do not believe we would have ever had the Vietnam War experience, at least not to the extent that we did. I mean, I think that the assassination of JFK more than anything else led to the tragedy that became Vietnam. And it all happened just as it did in Iraq because the people who made the decisions to get us involved didn’t fully understand what the hell was going on. They didn’t

understand... You know, it was a complete failure of intelligence. Vietnam was a situation where the truth of the matter is we were on the wrong side of that fight from the get go because Ho Chi Minh was the only person in Vietnam who was qualified to lead the country into the 21st Century. And we fucked it up, and instead allied ourselves with a corrupt clown who didn't know what he was doing. And the rest, as they say, was history.

Well, the same thing happened in Iraq. We had no understanding of what we were getting into when we decided to invade Iraq and topple Saddam Hussein. There was no need to do that. The anti-flyover system where basically we regulated Saddam Hussein's ability to conduct air operations... completely was working. There was no need to invade the country and topple him. That just didn't need to happen. And instead, you know, all we did was topple Saddam Hussein, create a situation of utter chaos within the country, and essentially free up three different factions who all hated each other to go fight with each other over who the hell was going to run the country. And Iran just sat back and profited from the whole exercise. I mean, it's just ridiculous. I don't understand why the people who we entrust to run things in our government don't have a better grasp of the facts than they do. It makes no sense to me. It's like, have you ever seen the movie, *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*?

LIBRE: No.

SMITH: Oh, it's a great movie. You can get it anywhere. You know, get it on demand. It stars Paul Newman and Robert Redford when they were much younger men. It's probably a 1967 movie, you know, around the time of when I graduated from college. But it's a terrific movie. And they're talking about stuff, and the guy who's hired them goes, "Morons." They've hired out as, they're bank robbers basically, and train robbers, but they have gone to Bolivia to escape being arrested and placed in jail in the American West. So they go to Bolivia, and they become mine payroll guards. And they're riding horses down the mountain as payroll guards, and they're arguing with each other, Butch Cassidy and Paul Newman are, about where the best ambush sites are that they could get shot at from. Finally, their boss leans around on his burro and he goes, "Morons. I have morons on my team. We're not going to get robbed going down the

mountain, assholes. We don't have any money going down the mountain. After we get to the bank at La Paz, then you can start to sweat." Well, it's one of the funniest scenes you've ever seen in the movies. And my point is, you know, and that's a wandering off the reservation from what we were talking about, but not really. The point of it is our elected officials are the morons on our team and they're a bunch of clowns and they don't know what the fuck they're doing. And that's too bad. Anyway, I don't know what happens to all of this drivel that we have sat and chitchatted about over the last couple hours, but I guess you guys will make such use of it as you will, and that'll be it.

LIBRE: Yeah, I want to say thank you so much for being here today. I really appreciate it.

SMITH: Okay.

LIBRE: I really enjoyed it.

SMITH: I can't imagine that what I've had to say really sort of adds to the volume or gravitas of this project, because I don't think I had anything to say that was particularly earthshaking. But...

LIBRE: No, that is absolutely not the case. Every single thing, it's a compilation of stories and memories and reflections, which is exactly what you have brought here today. And I really wanted to say thank you so much, and absolutely this has added to the database, and it's an honor to have been able to speak with you. And I want to say thank you so much.

[End of Interview.]