Orlo K. Steele
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Karen Navarro

SMID: This is Emily Smid ('18). I am at Rauner [Special Collections] Library at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Today is the 18th of October, 2016, and I am interviewing General Orlo Steele, who is in Grass Valley, California. And this interview is for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. Thank you so much again for agreeing to speak with me, General Steele. And I wondered if just to start you could tell me about your childhood, where you were born, your parents, and what you liked to do as a kid?

STEELE: Yes, I was born on the 28th of October, 1932, so I am approaching age 84, and I was born in Oakland, California. My dad was then a cement contractor and worked on the Bay bridges in San Francisco, and also on some tunnels and other major projects. We moved to Grass Valley in 1942 when I was nine, and I started the fifth grade here. Graduated eventually from Grass Valley High School. And in high school I worked underground in a gold mine. Grass Valley is in the gold country. It's located to the northeast of Sacramento in what we call the foothills of the Sierra Nevada on the western slopes, and it was all part of the original Gold Rush country. And I worked in a gold mine underground at 17, and then I started at Stanford that fall, and went through Stanford University [Stanford, CA]. And in 1955 I graduated in March, and I went into the Marine Corps in 1955.

SMID: So, when you were at Stanford, did you do OCS, Officer Candidate School, or what was your trajectory like in deciding to join the Marines?

STEELE: Actually, because we were a land grant university at the time, we all had to take ROTC for two years. I could not stand putting on a uniform one hour a week, so I did not stay with that program. And when I graduated, which was in March of 1955—I had to come back and work for a couple of quarters—I graduated in March of 1955, and applied for what we call the OCC, the Officer Candidate Course, the Marine Corps, and I did that in San Francisco. And I wrote to my draft board and I came back here and worked in the lumber industry, and I said, "Don't draft me because I'm

gonna be going into the Marine Corps in September." Well, about July I got a letter from headquarters of the Marine Corps which said my request to go into the Officer Candidate program had been disapproved, and it kind of said "not your personal qualifications but we just have more people that are more qualified than you."

So I enlisted in the Marine Corps, in September enlisted, and went to boot camp at [Marine Corps] Recruit Depot in San Diego. We sat around; just before Christmas I went up to Camp Pendleton [CA] to a rifle company to training at the infantry training school at Camp Pendleton. And I made Private 1st Class out of boot camp, so I was also used as a troop handler [inaudible] through. And somewhere around February or March, I was getting ready to finish. My commander said, "They are taking applications for the OCC, Officer Candidate Course, so I want you to apply." And I said, "Sir, I've already tried that and gotten turned down." He said, "Try it again." I said, "Sir, I don't think I'm gonna be [inaudible]. But he said, "I want you to try it again." So I got my papers today and applied, and within a couple weeks I had learned that I had been accepted. And by March of 1956 I was on my way back to Quantico [VA] and the Officer Candidate Course, and eventually was commissioned in June of '56. Started the basic [inaudible].

SMID: So, what do you think it was about your performance at Pendleton that separated you from your peers, that kind of got you recognized for having the outstanding leadership abilities necessary to go to OCC?

STEELE: Well, I had—number one, I was older. I was twenty– when I was going through recruit training, so I was older. You know, most of the recruits are 18. I was older, had a college degree, and that certainly gave me a leg up, I suppose. I realized later on that having not been accepted the first time turned out to be a real fortune to me, because by the time I did go back to the Officer Candidate Course, I could tear down a rifle and make a rack, [inaudible] difference between my left foot. So it really put me a leg up even when I went into Officer Candidate Course. So, I look back on that as a very positive experience.

SMID: So, what was the dynamic like between you being a Stanford grad and the men in—your peers at Pendleton who I'm

assuming had just enlisted, probably weren't educated? Were they resentful of that or did they respect you more?

STEELE: Oh, I think we kind of all respected each other at that particular time. I had been in a leadership position when I was in the recruit training, what they call the right guide, but that's a person who's kind of in charge of the platoon when drill instructors are not actually working us. And so, you know, I had had that experience in being in a leadership position. So, it was [inaudible] Well, I don't know, but it was perhaps things came to me a little bit easier, and I understood what was expected of us.

SMID: Okay. So, you said… you left off then, you said, where did you go after Pendleton? I'm sorry, I wrote it down, but I can't find it. [laughter]

STEELE: I went up at a place called the Mountain Warfare Training Center [CA] for 10 days of cold weather training, and when I came back, I'd been accepted. So, most of my contemporaries had gone on to where I would have gone, which was a battalion in a camp that was about three miles away. I ended up staying where I was with the infantry school until it was time for me to go back to Quantico, another couple of weeks.

SMID: So, can you tell me a little bit about– something that has always interested me, especially in the conversations I've had for the Dartmouth Vietnam project, is just sort of what training was like in terms of kind of breaking down spirits and building them back up, and I think I've found that there's a wide range of tactics and methods. So I wondered if you could touch a little bit about what your training, your officer training was like, and how it affected you mentally and prepared you for what you were going to do in the future?

STEELE: Okay. Well, first of all, boot camp was just to turn out a basic Marine, and we didn't get into tactics or anything like that. We learned—certainly we spent a lot of time on learning drill and on the rifle range and classes and that sort of things to become a basic Marine and get into your uniform. So, that was about 12 weeks in length at that time. Infantry training school is where you learned how to be an infantryman, and that's a machine gunner or a rocket mortarman or something like that. And so that's where you really involved in tactics, generally at the squad level.

When I went back to the Officer Candidate Course, it was much like recruit training, but we also blended that with a lot of tactics, and they also kind of threw at you things that, you know, you really shouldn't be able to do. For example, we would come in out of the field on a Friday night, muddy, and on Saturday morning we had to have inspection with everything clean. And they never gave you enough time to do anything. I actually had to take [inaudible] into the showers. You know, we'd take showers, and then we had to have our rifles cleaned and everything. And it was usually about—you didn't finish until about 3:00 in the morning, and before you got ready for this. And that was customary. They were always challenging you with things that really test your leadership.

I think we started off with 125 candidates. They were all college graduates. They came largely from the Northeast. I remember we had a number from Notre Dame and Villanova and Boston University and a lot of schools, and some from the South. And I think there was only two or three of us who had been in any former enlisted experience. The fellow I bunked with, as a matter of fact, was a… I'll cover that later. But, they really gave us almost impossible tasks to accomplish. And I think out of that 125 we ended up commissioning maybe 75. About 55 were dropped along the way.

SMID: Wow. So, I'm guessing by that time you had gotten a little bit more accustomed to the idea of being in uniform? [laughter]

STEELE: Yes. [laughter] And also, you know, we were in great shape, and we had obstacle courses and forced marches and carrying heavy loads and that sort of thing. And they were working on us hard.

SMID: So, what were you going to say about your bunkmate?

STEELE: I'm trying to think. Bill. I'm trying to think of his last name. He had gone to—what's the school in upstate New York? Syracuse.

SMID: Cornell?

STEELE: No. It was a men's college at the time, I think. I'll think of it later. I'll come back at it.

SMID: Okay.

STEELE: Your next question?

SMID: Okay. So, you finished your training, and then what did you do between that time and the time you shipped out to go to Vietnam?

STEELE: Oh, gosh. Well, first of all, when you finish a training, that was just being commissioned. Then we have, and all Marines go through the next phase which is to go through what we call The Basic School, TBS. The Basic School. And that's also located at Quantico, where all of our schools are. And this is for newly commissioned 2nd lieutenants. We're organized into rifle companies for a 50-man rifle platoon, so a company. And there may be three companies [inaudible] at the same time. And I was in the class that was called 356 [inaudible]. And we were there from July until right when we graduated. So, there what we go through is [inaudible], and we finished that. And then I was appointed as an infantry officer, and my first—and we were offered to…

I'm getting a lot of feedback on this.

SMID: I am also getting a lot of feedback. I'm not sure what's going on. Let me pause the recording quickly. [Pause in recording at 14:29. The feedback and breaks in audio stopped at this point.]

STEELE: By the way, all these years I was a bachelor, and my first duty station that we could apply, I applied for in the Far East. The Marine Corps has three Marine infantry divisions: one at Camp Pendleton, that's the first division; one at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, that's the second division; and then we had one that was out in the Far East. Then it was divided between Okinawa and the mainland Japan. And I put in for the 3rd Marine Division for several reasons. One, it was a great place to save money in those days. And a 2nd lieutenant earned $220 a month was our pay, and I had had to go into debt in order to buy all my uniforms, which were about $800. And so I went there in order to be able to, one, begin to pay off my uniforms and still have some spending money, which is what we could do; we could live very economically in Japan and Okinawa. The exchange rate at

the time of Japanese yen was 360 yen to the American dollar.

So, anyway, I went out to the 3rd Division, and those tours then were 15 months. I was assigned to an infantry battalion, the 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines. That's the regiment with the 9th Marines which at the time were on Okinawa. And soon after I joined them, I was given a rifle platoon. That's normally a 44-man rifle platoon. And my platoon sergeant was a full-blooded Sioux Indian, who became a friend. He just passed away this last year. But he ended up retiring as a sergeant major. His name was Joe Martin. And he was really good. He took me under his wing and I learned a great deal from him. Anyway, I had the rifle platoon for about five or six months, I think, and then I was taken up on the staff and I was made into the Assistant S-3, which is the assistant operations officer, so I had a staff assignment. And then, went back to having a rifle platoon again, and we went down on an exercise in the Philippines. By this time we had gone up to Japan. We were on the slopes of Mount Fuji, Japan. The camp was called Camp Fuji. We climbed the mountain, as a matter of fact, several times.

But I had a very positive experience as platoon commander. And my intention was not to make a career of the Marine Corps. My intention was, actually when I finished my three or four year tour, I was going to go into the graduate school in Phoenix, Arizona, at the old Thunderbird Field, which was in export-import. But, based on my positive experience, I ended up augmenting into the regular Marine Corps while I was there at Far East. So I ended up with a 15-month tour. My next duty station was at San Diego, California, as a…

SMID: I have a question. May I ask a question before we go on?

STEELE: Sure. Yes.

SMID: I just wanted to know a little bit about what the demographics, firstly, and secondly, the dynamics of your platoon, and how the men got along with one another and how you, I guess, got along with them, and just a little bit about that?

STEELE: Well, the dynamics are that for an infantry platoon commander, this is your closest really to the troops. You have an organization with three different squads or three

maneuver units. Squads were then 13-man squads, and plus a platoon sergeant and a right guide. And, so you live very close to them, particularly when you're in the field, and you are training them all the time, and at the same time you're learning, you know. One of the things that you learn is time and space, and you learn about how long does it take to, when you say "pack up, we're moving out," how long does it take them to break down their camps, get their packs ready and ready to go. And those are all things that kind of stay with you later on, and as you move up the chain and take larger units, then you work out a whole new time and space factors on these things. But this is where it starts and this is where you begin to…

SMID: So, you mentioned that your sergeant was a full-blooded Sioux Indian. Were most of the men in your platoon, were they white or were they black, or what was the ethnic breakdown?

STEELE: At that particular time we didn't have very many blacks in the Marine Corps or in the Navy in those days. This is 1956. I think when I was in boot camp, we had, out of a 70-man platoon, we had two black recruits. And as I remember, both had had some college or were college graduates. But we just didn't have that many black Marines at that particular time, and it wasn't until later that we started taking many more blacks. So we had, for the most part they were almost all high school graduates, and we had some who later on, you know, that did very well and stayed in the Marine Corps for years, but most of them, the vast majority, stayed for maybe a four year tour. But, I am still in contact with some of my recruit mates who now live retired and live in Ohio and things like that, but people I went through boot camp with.

SMID: Did many of them become career military men, as well, or kind of…

STEELE: A few did, yes, yes. And went through the ranks and then retired as 1st sergeants. Go ahead.

SMID: So, you said your next assignment after the Far East?

STEELE: After the Far East, I was still a bachelor and I was assigned to the recruit depot at San Diego, and I was assigned as what they call a series officer. And a series officer was responsible for, say, three 70-man recruit platoons and their

drill instructors, and they were all following the same training schedule, similar to what I had gone through when I had been a recruit myself. And the reason we had started a policy of having more oversight, officer oversight over our recruit platoons, after what was called a tragic death in early 1956 down at Paris Island, which is our second recruit depot, in South Carolina. And there was a drill instructor who, as a way of punishment, had taken his platoon out and marched them on a night march and they went through a swamp in which I think there were seven recruits who ended up dying in that incident. And as a result of that, the Marine Corps increased the amount of officer oversight, and so series officers they'd always had, but they increased the number. And that's what I was there for. What series officers did, we observed their training all of the time, watched the drill instructors putting them through training. We did not interfere with that training, unless there was something that was where the drill instructors had gone beyond what their authority allowed. But we inspected them, went to the rifle range with them, we marched them wherever they'd had any physical marches, observed them on the obstacle courses, paid them, you know, did all of those things. So, we followed their training as they progressed from the first week up until they graduated, which was usually about 12 weeks later.

SMID: Did you like that work or did you prefer more of like an active role rather than just one of an overseer?

STEELE: Well, in every one of my assignments, I learned something. The reason I stayed in the Marine Corps is because they always kept me reaching. And in this instance, you know, I learned really to become a very good inspector, and started to learn about asking the right questions when you do your inspections, and I became very good at that. I also got very good because when they would go to the rifle range, I'd go up and I got to fire the pistol and really became a good pistol expert. And there was also quite a few ceremonies where there were swords, and so I learned a lot about ceremonies and parades and that sort of thing. So, that was what I took away probably from that experience.

And I was only a series officer for about nine months, and then I was asked to be an aide for the commanding general of the recruit training command, and who was a very fine officer, and so I became his aide, and after six months he was assigned to Hawaii to command the 1st Marine Brigade.

He was a brigadier general. And since I'd only been with him six months, he said, "How would you like to go along?" And I said, "Love to." So, after 19 October or so of 1959, I was also assigned to the 1st Marine Brigade, which is located at Kaneohe, Hawaii. And I stayed with him for another six months as his aide. And again, I learned many, many things as his aide.

SMID: Did you mention his name? And if not, could you?

STEELE: Sure. It was General Weede, R. G. Weede, Robert G. Weede (W-e-e-d-e). He later retired as a lieutenant general and was the commanding general of FMFLANT, Atlantic [Fleet Marine Force, Atlantic].

SMID: And so, you were his aide, and what was that like? And did you feel like he took on a sort of mentor role for you, and if so, what sorts of things did he teach you that you carried on later in your career?

STEELE: Well, number one, you're with him all the time during the working hours, and you assist him in many different ways. And in return, you know, you're with him, and so you watch how he commands and his relationship with his subordinates and their relationship with him, and you're really a fly on the wall in just being able to watch how a senior officer manages a very large unit. So, and then, you know, you're with him and you're talking all of the time, and so he does take on as a mentor. And I tried to do exactly the same later on when I became a general in the selection of my aides, and I tried to expose them the same way and benefit that I had received from General Weede.

SMID: And so, I'm sure also being with General Weede kind of—well, always during the working hours you saw a lot of the bad as well as the good, I would guess?

STEELE: Yes. Sure, sure. Exactly. You know, how he ran his meetings with his staff, how he did with his commanders, what he was interested in when we would go to the field and watch the troops under training conditions. And then, you were also an aide really to his lady, his wife, so that when they would have receptions or social events, my responsibilities, I was always in the receiving line and would introduce people coming through the receiving line to the general and his lady and all that sort of thing.

SMID: So, at this time were you still a bachelor?

STEELE: I was still a bachelor. But, it was just about the time I'd been with him another six months and we had agreed that a year, as an aide was probably, it was time to move on. So, the 1st Marine Brigade then consisted of about 6,000 troops and it had an infantry regiment which was the 4th Marine regiment and it had an air group which had helicopters and fast moving airplanes, and plus a logistics group. And I went, and so I asked for and was assigned to the 4th Marines, which was the regiment that was there, and went to the reconnaissance company as the executive officer, or the XO, executive officer of the reconnaissance company.

And it was at that particular time that I was introduced through mutual friends to [laughter] the girl who I courted and married eventually and is still my wife. My wife was born and raised in Honolulu. Her father had been a Supreme Court justice when it was still a territory, and there were three territorial Supreme Court justices. And so she was—although Caucasian and what they called a "haole," she was nevertheless a daughter of the Islands. And she was raised in Honolulu. She had been there for Pearl Harbor Day, and then was evacuated back to California with her mother and sister, and came back to the Islands. Her dad stayed. And then graduated from Punahou, which is a private high school in the Class of '54, and then went on to Oregon State for college, because Oregon and Hawaii had reciprocal arrangements that their students did not have to pay out of state tuition. And so she went to Oregon State, got her teaching credential, and was back teaching on the Marine base at Kaneohe where I was living as a bachelor.

And so, we met through mutual friends and I started courting her when I went to the reconnaissance company, and we courted until we were married in July of 1961, 55 years ago. So we met in May, I think it was, of 1960, and then I continued in my job and we were married in the Episcopal Church in Honolulu, at the cathedral there or in the chapel there, and were married in '61. And in the meantime I stayed on in the reconnaissance company which was, again learned all kinds of skills and techniques and reconnaissance. We did a lot of work in rubber boats and in submarines and lockouts from submarines, and it was kind of interesting work. And again, I learned a whole bunch of new skills.

And after Cathy and I were married, we went off to Japan for our honeymoon. We were gone on our honeymoon for three or four weeks, I think, traveled all over Japan where I'd served before. And then came back and then we started up a household, rented a house right opposite the base. And eventually—I had a rifle company then. I was assigned to a rifle company, and had that for about 14 or 15 months, and then also, our son, who uses my name, Orlo, although Colin is his…

SMID: I have some questions.

STEELE: Yes. Go ahead.

SMID: I'm sorry. So, how did you go from being part of the reconnaissance team to then having a rifle unit?

STEELE: Well, I was going to tell you I was promoted to captain. We were married in July, and that October I was promoted to—I had been assigned over to the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, had been a captain, so that was the—usually company commanders are captains.

SMID: Okay. So, your son was born?

STEELE: Yeah, he was born in September, I think it was the 2nd, September the 2nd of 1962, in Queens Hospital in Honolulu. That's the same hospital where my wife was born. And so, that was at the time, just when that was going on, I was being reassigned to the regimental staff, having had a rifle company for about 14 months, and that was when what we call "the Missiles of October" today, that was when the Cuban Missile Crisis—I don't know if you're familiar with that—took place.

SMID: Yes.

STEELE: And he was, by then it was just about… It's the only time I was ever scared, Emily. I was sure it was gonna be Armageddon. And we were to participate in a major landing exercise on the island of Maui, and I was working on the regimental staff, and we'd developed a landing plan for this amphibious exercise on Maui, and then all of a sudden we learned that one of our major ships, which was called an LPH [Landing Platform Helicopter], which is a helicopter

platform for helicopter landings, had dropped out of the exercise. And then, we redid the whole landing plan, and then we started to doing it, and then we learned another major ship had dropped out. And then we learned that the President, President [John F.] Kennedy, was going to be speaking to the nation on Monday. So, our S-3 at the time, a Major Webb, said, "Let's wait and see what's going on." And that's when we learned that the Cuban Missile Crisis, that the entire squadron that we were to use had been turned around and gone back to Camp Pendleton and picked up the 7th Marines, and took them around through the [Panama] Canal to Cuba, and they were to be a part of the landing force at that particular time. Let me also just mention, there was a couple of times…

SMID: [inaudible] fear?

STEELE: Pardon me? Go ahead.

SMID: So, go ahead.

STEELE: Well, I was just going to say…

SMID: Oh, I was just going to say…

STEELE: That was one incident when we almost thought we were going to go to war. There was another one, while I was courting Cathy and I was still in recon, when we were schedule to take place on a major exercise on California, and the whole brigade was going to go, and soon after, and this was now in I think it was about February of 1961, and we were to be married in July. So, we were going to be gone for two or three months on Camp Pendleton, and they loaded up the entire brigade and squadron and everything else. And it was just at that time they stopped, they offloaded the band and some other things, loaded aboard ammunition. And then when we sailed, instead of heading for California, we started heading for the Far East. And this was during the Laotian crisis, in which President Kennedy had ordered deployments, particularly of the Marines, off Laos. So, part of the 3rd Marine Division had gone down there, and then we were going out to rejoin the 3rd Marine Division from Hawaii. And, so we ended up going back—we didn't go to Laos, but we ended up being there at Okinawa for about two or three weeks, and then we turned around and the crisis was over.

But that was another time when we thought we were going to be going to war.

SMID: So, I guess for the sake of time, I wondered if you could just talk a little bit about the lead-up to you going to Vietnam, and your experience there?

STEELE: Yeah. In 19—when I had a rifle company, we could see Vietnam on the horizon. We already had observers who were going into Vietnam, and we were getting closer and closer. We never did while I was there, but from there I went up to a duty station up in the Mountain Warfare Training Center, which was up in the Sierras of northern California, and we trained and had scenarios in counter guerrilla warfare and that sort of thing. And, so I did that for two years. And then I went to sea duty, and I was on sea duty out of Norfolk, Virginia, on a brand new aircraft carrier called the USS America, and I was on there from 1965 until the end of 1966, so I think January of '65 we put the ship into commission. And right after we had put it into commission is when they started to land the first Marines in March of that year, '65, is when the first Marines started landing outside Da Nang, and we began the buildup of US forces.

But, I was on sea duty. See, I wasn't going to go anywhere. So, all during those first two years, I was on sea duty. Now, we trained a lot with our Marines ashore, and usually knew that when we got to leave the ship, that we would be going to Vietnam. And so, that was a two-year tour. And as a matter of fact, I just came back from a reunion in Norfolk with that group. And during my last two or three months, I had marched them through the dismal swamp. [laughter] Starting in South Carolina, we marched all the way back to ship, and lived in the swamps and everything else. And the reason was because we knew we were going to be heading for Vietnam originally.

So, I left that sea duty in December, and I wanted to go to Vietnam then, but my monitor said, "No, you've been away from the family." So, they sent me to school at Quantico to the Amphibious Warfare School, which normally it was a year long, but they had cut it down to six months. And I went to the Amphibious Warfare School at Quantico, as by now I had just been promoted to a major, and I went to Quantico for the Amphibious Warfare School, and when we completed

that, I was assigned to Vietnam. And when we did that, my wife and our two children now were…

SMID: So, you…

STEELE: Go ahead.

SMID: You said that you wanted to go to Vietnam then, but they made you do more amphibious training. Why did you want to go then? Why did you not want to wait?

STEELE: Well, they didn't want to send me right away to Vietnam because on sea duty I'd been, you know, gone for deployments to the Mediterranean and Caribbean and everything else, to the Mediterranean for almost seven or eight months, and then the Caribbean for months. So I was at sea a lot and they knew that. So, they wanted to give me a little bit more time with my family, so I had six more months while I was going to the Amphibious Warfare School. That make sense?

SMID: Okay. Yes, at that point, though, you felt ready to go?

STEELE: Oh, yes, absolutely. I was… And, you know, learned more skills at the Amphibious Warfare School. And then we graduated in June of 1967. I drove with the family across country, stayed here in Grass Valley for a short time with my mother, and then we moved, my wife and two children then, we moved back to Honolulu, and she stayed with her parents and the children and our car. And I got on a plane and headed for Vietnam. I arrived in Vietnam in, kind of in August, mid-August, I think, of 1967, as a major.

SMID: And so, you arrive. How are you feeling? Because at that time things were really picking up in Vietnam. Were you scared?

STEELE: No. No, no. I felt well-trained. I was assigned initially to a, I had a headquarters company, and I didn't like that very well, of a division. I was assigned to the 1st Marine Division, which was then at Da Nang. And the 3rd Marine Division was assigned up further north up along the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone]. So, by now we had more than two Marine divisions that were all in Vietnam. And we were approaching the high water mark, as far as our involvement. And initially I had headquarters company, headquarters battalion, which had

about 700 or 800 or 900 troops, something like that, but it included outfits like the band and everything else, and the security platoon and the post office people and G staffs [general staff], and it wasn't what I had hoped for. I had hoped to go to an infantry battalion.

But, there was a fellow by the name of Colonel R.D. Bone who was just taking over the 5th Marine Regiment, and he said, "I'll get you up into the 5th Marines." And he kept his word. So, I had that headquarters company, which I had also then—we [inaudible] provisional rifle companies and did security duty and everything else. And in January I had five days' R&R [rest and recuperation] back in Hawaii with the family, and then returned back at the end of, towards the end of January of 1968, and I had orders to go up to the 5th Marine Regiment, and that's when the Tet [Offensive] started. Yeah, that was at the very end of January.

SMID: So, yeah, I want to hear, I would love to hear about your experience in the Tet Offensive. You wrote in your form that you were involved in retaking operations against the North Vietnamese Army forces infiltrating across the border between Laos and Hue. Is that correct?

STEELE: Right. That's correct.

SMID: So, yeah, can you just tell me a little bit about that, your experience in…

STEELE: Yeah. We were doing a security duty right around the division CP [Command Post] at the time, because they were sending up units to try to break through those lines. And we did that for the first couple of days. And then I was assigned up to the 5th Marines, and I boarded a C853 helicopter from Da Nang and flew up to Phu Bai, which was the airfield, and that's where the 5th Marine Regiment had its rear area. And Phu Bai is about 10 miles south of Hue. And at the time, Hue was kind of out of bounds except for units which were passing through on their way up to the 3rd Marine Division.

And the battalion I was being assigned to was the 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. The battalion commander was Lieutenant Colonel Ernest [C.] Cheatham, [Jr.] who I had known. Actually he had been one of our officers when I had been a recruit. And Colonel Cheatham was a big guy. In fact, he had played professional football for the Baltimore Colts,

where he'd picked up the name "Dirty Ernie" as a football tackle. And, but he was a great commander. And the 5th, his battalion, had been piecemealed in to the city of [Hue], G company. 2nd battalion, by the way, had four rifle companies, and they were E company, F company, G and Hotel. So they were called Echo, Fox, Golf and Hotel companies. And E company stayed down on a bridge that they had to guard south of Phu Bai, but the other three companies were eventually piecemealed into Hue to help retake the city.

And when the North Vietnamese had marched in, they came in with a number of regiments, I think somewhere around 4,000 or 5,000 troops, and took over most of the city that was not being defended by South Vietnamese forces. And there were some across the river and there was a general in the headquarters over near what they called the Citadel. And the city is divided into two major sections, and the northern section is the old Citadel, which is an ancient fortress. And then to the south of that, it was the Perfume River, which is a very large river. And then, the area that's right across on the other side of the Perfume River was where the French had built up and had their buildings that housed their government functions and post office, and there was a university and a number of large areas. But they had been built up by the French since kind of the turn of the century, so it was a little more modern on that side than it was, than the ancient city. And there were several bridges that connected the two sides.

And there was also a headquarters for a military advisory group that was there and that was commanded by an Army colonel, and there was a number of advisors and things located in Hue. But, that still had not been taken by the North Vietnamese, but it ended up our first company going in was G company, Golf company, and they ended up just defending that. And then Fox company was committed, and the two, Fox and Golf. And then Ernie Cheatham went in with Hotel Company and some of his headquarters. And there was one other battalion of two companies that was there, from 1-1 actually, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, and the regimental commander was from the 1st Marines. So we ended up with, south of the Perfume River, five Marine rifle companies, two battalions of five Marine rifle companies, and they got the mission to clear everything south of the Perfume River, which had been in the old French. And they

started down and they said, “Oh, and by the way, you can’t chip the paint.” No supporting arms, no air, no nothing like that.

And eventually, it became very intensive with the North Vietnamese on one side of the street and the Marines on the other side of the street, and then trying to clear that. It was, Ernie Cheatham kind of took that decision out of the hands by using his own firepower from his recoilless rifle platoons, and started taking out machine gun positions with 106mm recoilless rifles. And the war was on. And eventually, as it became much more intense, then we could begin to use some artillery fire, and eventually air was used also. But, in the old Citadel, which was across the way, the walls of the Citadel were 16 feet thick. I mean, 155mm artillery just bounced off and didn’t affect it at all. And we started—and that’s where I joined, then, 1-5 up there.

SMID: So, what was the timeframe like on that?

STEELE: Well, actually, I had been down at Phu Bai, and they were, at the time Hue was pretty much cut off, and they could only take—they could get in by helicopters, and I wanted to get in, but until—a bridge had been destroyed across what they called the Phu Cam Canal, which was just in that area south. And, so I put together a composite rifle company of about 120 troops, some had people who had been wounded slightly and were going back, and some others from the 1st Marines, and some cooks and bakers and our regular rifle platoon. And I was told to go on up and the 2-5 was going to be uncovering the bridge across the Phu Cam Canal, and I was given an engineer unit detachment with a Bay City crane and some lumber, and they were to repair the bridge.

So, we went up and got so close, we were about a mile or two outside of Hue, and then eventually they said, “Turn around and come back,” because the bridge had not been uncovered. So I brought everybody back. And then they were to move, a company out of 1-5 was going to go up and do the same thing the next day, but they got delayed. So I went back to the ones who had arranged for us, I said, “Listen, we rehearsed this thing. Why don’t we go back and do it again?” So they did. We put that whole lash up together again, and we started up the road and got into this area right outside the Phu Cam, and there was a Vietnamese engineer unit that was there. And I called the engineers up and I said,

"Okay…" The bridge was collapsed. It was a cement bridge. It was collapsed in the Phu Cam Canal, which was probably about 60 or 80 feet across. And they said—I called the engineer officer up and I said, "Okay, fix it." He said, "I can't do that." I said, "What do you mean you can't do that?" He said, "I was told it was just kind of cratered, and we don't have the means to do that." I said, "Well, do what you can."

In the meantime, Colonel Cheatham was on the other side of the Phu Cam Canal and he said, "Come on over here and I'll give you some instructions." So, another lieutenant and I, we stood down and we found an old canoe, and we swam across the Phu Cam Canal, got over to the other side, and that was where Golf company was, and they had a couple of vehicles, and they took us down to where the Battalion CP was at that time inside Hue. And I remember we would go down streets and we'd hit intersections, we would fly by at about 80 miles an hour, just because of not giving anybody a shot. And that's where I reported to Colonel Cheatham. And he told me to take charge of everybody on that side of the Phu Cam, move up the river the next day, and they would uncover another bridge with Hotel company.

And in the meantime, I went back—and they'd built a wooden bridge a couple of planks wide—and got back on the other side, and by that time I had called down to the south to say, "Stop the flow," because there were no more room, you know, to take anybody. The rifle company from 1-1, Alpha 1-1, was with us, and I took charge of all of those guys, and plus other people. And we were on that side that night and were covered. And we got strafed by some of our own down the Phu Cam Canal by our own Hueys, not Marine, they were Army Hueys that kind of strafed all the way down. Anyway, we stayed there that night and went up and cleared up to the next bridge the next day, and then got across the Phu Cam Canal, and I became the XO of 2-5 at that time. This was now about the 8th of January, so the battle had been going on for about a week at the time I got in.

SMID: So, it sounds like you were able to stay really calm in the face of what was surely a lot of anxiety and terror. Can you talk a little bit about that, like what it was like being fired upon by the enemy and kind of having to stay so stoic and strong?

STEELE: Oh, you know, by that time I had had a lot a lot of training. I felt about as well trained as anybody could be for that experience. I also knew—at least three of the rifle companies had been good friends. One had been Captain [George R. "Ron"] Christmas, who had Hotel Company, and I had shared a parachute together when we were going through the Mountain Leadership School and learning how to ski at 9,000 feet. And I had known him for years. And then one of, the fellow who had Fox company had been in the Amphibious Warfare School with me. And, of course, I knew Colonel Cheatham. So I felt very comfortable and easy to slip in. One thing about the Marine Corps, it's a pretty small outfit, and so we know a lot of—you know, a lot of us have had experiences with one another. So, no, I felt very…

The first thing he did was have me set up a new CP and we went down and we went into what had been a three-story apartment building in which a number of Germans had been there with a medical unit. You know, the Germans were pretty well involved in Vietnam. They had a hospital ship and a [inaudible] station. They had another hospital in the town that I had served in. And here they had had a number of Germans who had worked in humanitarian roles in Vietnam, and they lived in this fairly modern three-story apartment. So, that became our command post. We didn't occupy—we only occupied the second and the first floor, because of the enemy's mortars. We didn't want to get rockets or mortars.

And so we operated out of there, making—we were under attacks every day, until eventually Hue became, after about 30 days, Hue became the Vietnamese… The North Vietnamese eventually gave up their positions in the Citadel and left. But, it was a very, very close battle. In our battalion, which is about 800 men, I think we probably had 200 or so wounded from various wounds, including Ron Christmas, who got a Navy Cross. He's still a good friend. He's still alive. And Ernie Cheatham, who also earned a Navy Cross. And [Michael P.] Mike Downs earned a Silver Star. They really, it was very, pretty intensive fighting.

SMID: Any deaths?

STEELE: And I think we lost about 80 KIAs [Killed in Action] also out of that 800. But, eventually we overcame the resistance.

SMID: So, I'm curious…

STEELE: It probably became the high water mark, also the Tet Offensive they added two more regiments of Marines. So, we ended up probably having two-thirds of the whole Marine Corps were assigned to Vietnam at that particular time. And of the American forces, I think we were over a half a million. I think we were 500,000-plus American forces by the end of the Tet. So, it was kind of the high water mark.

SMID: So, I am curious because the majority of people I have interviewed so far have been either drafted or served two years after doing ROTC at Dartmouth. And I've been asking them, you know, after Vietnam and after years have passed, what their opinion of American involvement is and whether or not they felt like the US should have involved itself in the Vietnam War. And I'm curious what your opinion is on that as a career military individual?

STEELE: Okay. Well, after the Tet, then we moved further south, and eventually our battalion was moved out, more out towards the Laotian border at a place called An Hoa (A-n H-o-a). And by this time, Colonel Cheatham had left. I was a major, and I ended up being in command of the battalion for about three weeks at that particular time, as the 5th Marines made their move from the Phu Bai area out to An Hoa. And then we got another lieutenant colonel and I went back being the Exec, and stayed there until about September.

By this time I knew I had orders to Dartmouth. And when I departed, I rode a Jeep, no escort or anything, all the way back to Da Nang. And kids were playing on the streets, commerce had been restored. There had been a second wave after Vietnam. I felt we had—we were winning the war, notwithstanding the Tet Offensive was a strategic setback, at least particularly on people back at home. But at that particular time, I was very optimistic on the outcome of the war, and that we were on the winning side.

So, that's the way it was when I left and went back, picked up my wife and family in Honolulu. We flew back to California for a few days, and then flew into Boston, picked up our car and drove up to Hanover, New Hampshire, and arrived there around the 10th of October, just about the same time this year, you know, when the color was up and everything else. So, I was very positive at that particular time. And I then learned, you know, that there were different

attitudes. For example, the ROTC units were then in Dartmouth Hall. Do you know where Dartmouth Hall is there?

SMID: Uh-huh. I do, yes.

STEELE: And the Navy unit had the entire third floor. And the Army unit and the Air Force unit shared the second floor. And can you guess who was on the first floor?

SMID: [laughter] Well, I must confess that I know from your description that it was the Students for a Democratic Society.

STEELE: [laughter] Yeah. Yeah, somebody really figured that one out, and figured they would not blow up their own building. So, it was two actually, the Dartmouth Outing Club and the SDS were on the first floor, which was kind of… And I didn't even know, Emily, what the SDS was. When I first heard about SDS, I thought it was an advertising campaign for a soap company or something. I had no idea what SDS was. And then I soon learned. And my assignment…

SMID: Did you interact with them at all?

STEELE: Pardon me? I'm sorry, what was the question?

SMID: Did you interact with the people—did you have any interaction with the students that were in SDS, and if so, what was their attitude like towards you?

STEELE: Eventually a couple of them came and took my classes. They were able to, you know. [laughter] And I had a few that were in class, yeah, good, bright kids, you know, for the most part. And when the SDS… The university at the time was going through an examination—or the college at the time was going through the question of ROTC on the campus, as they were doing in almost all the Ivy League schools. And they were questioning whether or not, should they continue to have ROTC offered at Dartmouth? And I had a good friend that I will talk to you about him later.

SMID: Did you know when you got your orders…

STEELE: Did I know what? When I got my orders?

SMID: Your orders to be at Dartmouth, that their ROTC program was kind of in a tenuous position?

STEELE: In jeopardy? No. I did not know that at all. That was never… But, after I'd been there and picked up, you know, I had my class… And my assignment, by the way, was called a Marine Officer Instructor, acronym is MOI, and all the NROTC units had usually one MOI plus an assistant MOI, and I had a gunnery sergeant also with me, and we had a corner office up on the third deck. And there had been the previous year, I think, some attempts to interfere with, I think the ROTC units used to have a parade in the spring or something like that, and there was no interplay, but there was just protests and that sort of thing when they would do this out there. But other than that, all of our students wore their uniforms to class, particularly when they had drill and that sort of thing, and were accepted for the most part. Dartmouth's had a good football team and we had several of our members who were on the football team.

But, the freshman class officer was a good friend of mine by the name of Steve Duncan, and he had served in Vietnam on a Navy ship, and before he came to Dartmouth. He had been a graduate. He was from Oklahoma and had graduated from the Naval Academy, and then he and his wife came to Dartmouth. And they ended up being our next-door neighbors. We lived in college housing over on the other side of the golf course. And Steve and I—his name was Steve Duncan—and Steve and I would attend the faculty meetings, as a matter of fact. And one of the leaders of the movement against ROTC was a professor by the name of [Jonathan] Mirsky. And I forget what he taught. I think he taught either history or maybe government, something. And his wife was also one of the professors there. I think she was the one they really wanted. But anyway, Professor Mirsky was one of the outspoken critics of the ROTC, and always spoke up.

And pretty much the faculty, I would say, if there were any real support, it was in the Geography Department. For some reason we had a lot of former CIA, who were on the overt side of the CIA, who worked in the Geography Department, and they were kind of openly supportive. And generally the administration was. As you know, President [John Sloan] Dickey was in, approaching his 25th year, I think, as president at Dartmouth, as it got into '69. And eventually

they announced the decision. I kind of remember—I also became the Scoutmaster in town for the local troop. I was asked to do that because a retired Marine who had commanded the NROTC unit was retired up there and stayed and became the Executive Officer at the engineer school. What do we call the engineer school? I can't… What's the engineer school at Dartmouth?

SMID: Thayer.

STEELE: Thayer, yeah. He was the Executive Officer. And he had asked me to take over the Scouts, so I did. And I remember it was in February, it was a very, very cold night, but that's when they made the announcement—February or March. Winter was still on. And they made the announcement at that time regarding ROTC. They had already accepted some people for the incoming class that would be coming in in 1969, and so that would be the Class of '73, I think. And they said, "We will continue ROTC to let that new class come in, but not accept any more students in any of the ROTC programs subsequent to that class." So, they would just attrite out. At that time and that day is when the SDS decided to take over the administration building. And I think there were about 40 of them.

SMID: Uh-huh, Parkhurst.

STEELE: Parkhurst Hall. And you may have the date better than I do, but I remember it was a night I had on Scouts. And they took over Parkhurst Hall, threw out President Dickey, plus the dean of men—Dartmouth still hadn't brought in any female students at the time—and everybody else, and barricaded themselves in. And the television cameras came out, and I remember somebody came up from SDS and said, "What do you think of their decision?" And I said, "I don't think very much of it." And then I went off to a Scout meeting, which we used to have at the white church, the Congregational church up there, in the basement. And I remember there were TV cameras and a fairly large crowd outside of Parkhurst at the time. But, it gets very cold, as you know, at night, and on that particular night I think the temperatures dropped down to around subzero, probably about 20˚ below, which was kind of customary. And the crowd very quickly thinned out.

And somewhere in the early morning hours of the next day, there were about 40 of the biggest New Hampshire State

Police, came out at Parkhurst with their megaphone and said to those who had barricaded themselves inside, "You've got two to three minutes to clear the building and come out." And they didn't. [laughter] And those big, burly New Hampshire State Police hit that door, and by 8:00 that morning, they had taken each of the students who had gone in there, and somehow they had gotten a haircut, and they were standing in front of a magistrate someplace in New Hampshire, and they all got 30 days in the pokey. Does that jive with the history you remember, or what you have been told?

SMID: Yes, definitely. Yes.

STEELE: Later on, as a brigadier general, I—let me just give you a little aside here—later on when I was a brigadier general, I was the legislative assistant to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, and I was up at one of the Senate hearings, and I was outside. I was a smoker then. And out came the senator from New Hampshire, Senator [Warren B.] Rudman. Does that ring a bell with you? He was a senator for a couple of terms from New Hampshire. And I said, "How are things in New Hampshire?" He said, "Were you up there?" I said, "Yes, I was up at Dartmouth College." He said, "Were you up there when the students took over the administration building?" I said, "Yes, I remember it very well." "And what they did," he said, "that was my plan." [laughter] He had written a plan in the event that there was ever a disturbance at Dartmouth, and that's the one they executed. So, Senator Rudman, who was then the Attorney General for the state of New Hampshire, was the guy who had drafted that plan that they executed that night. Just a little bit of a side that I happen to know that's true.

SMID: So, what did you think about the Parkhurst takeover? I mean, did you feel tied at all to Hanover, or were you kind of like, you didn't really mind if you had to stay there or not?

STEELE: Oh, no. By this time, you know, we felt settled in. We loved it. We loved New England and Dartmouth and liked the college scene, and I had some very fine students. For example, one of my seniors, and he was the head of the battalion, the highest rank, was Sandy Alderson. Does that ring a bell with you?

SMID: Sandy Alderson. Is he a famous person?

STEELE: Yes. [Richard L.] Sandy Alderson is the name I'll give you and you might want to interview him. Sandy also was a senior that year. He was a son of a lieutenant colonel in the Air Force. And he went into the Marine Corps. I commissioned him into the Marine Corps in that June of '69. He went off to The Basic School, and then to Vietnam. He earned a Bronze Star, a Purple Heart. Later was assigned to the Marine barracks in Washington, had the silent drill team. Married a girl from New England, and then when he left the Marine Corps, both he and his wife went back to Harvard Law School.

And Sandy had always loved baseball, and so afterwards he went out to California, and Levi Strauss Company then owned the Oakland A's, Oakland Athletics, and Sandy became their public affairs guy. And then, when the general manager left, I want to say this was about 19—well, it was when the earthquake was going on in San Francisco, about '86, '87. Anyway, Sandy became the general manager, and took the Oakland A's to the World Series, and they played the San Francisco Giants, I think in '87 or '88. I guess it was '88. And that's when they had the earthquake in San Francisco. So, subsequently he stayed with them and we talked frequently, and he had it when the baseball strike went on. They lost $20 million, he said. And then he became a member of the Baseball Commission. He wasn't the Commissioner, but he was head of operations for about 10 years. And after that, he went out and took over the San Diego Chargers as a manager for a couple of years, and then he went back and took over the New York Mets, and he took them to the World Series last year. That's Sandy Alderson.

SMID: Wow. I hope that you're going to get some tickets out of that friendship. Oh, my gosh.

STEELE: [laughter] Yeah. So, he's a good guy. And he was one of my students. So, let's see, what else can I tell you?

SMID: Well, before we go, I have a couple more… Well, first, just a couple more questions. I wonder if you can just say anything about whether your experience at Dartmouth after leaving Vietnam, and kind of seeing a lot of anti-war activity colored your experience there any more and made you see it in a different light? And then I also wanted you to, if you can, talk

briefly about your involvement in the Congressional investigation of the bombing of Pan-Am 103.

STEELE: Okay. I think we're going to have to go into another session. I'll let you know that right now.

SMID: You think so? Okay.

STEELE: I think so.

SMID: Okay.

STEELE: I felt a little bit depressed, you know, with the anti- sentiment that was kind of going on. But we had a very good unit. We had Captain [Matthew] Hirsch was our what they called the professor of naval science. And I enjoyed the staff very much, and relationships there, and also the relationships with the other ROTC. We didn't really feel hemmed in. We wore uniforms all the time. But my gunnery sergeant and I was always—we thought, because some of the ROTC units had been broken into and people take n out, that we were going to be prepared for that. So we had a plan in our corner office that we would throw our desk—if they did come up, we'd throw the desk across the door so they couldn't get in. And then, because I had taught mountaineering, you know, and cliff assault and all that, I had a climbing rope up there, so we could always rappel out the window from the third deck. That was our plan. And we kept the ropes for that, just to make sure.

But, other than that, they never, students never seemed to interfere with us at all. Some recruiters came up and they got kind of a bad time, but we were pretty much accepted. And indeed, as I said, later on some wanted to take my class, which was fine. Oh, I got a little bit depressed. But in the summertimes, we had to go off to training with the midshipmen. And that first year I went down to a place called Little Creek, Virginia, which is very close, in Norfolk, Virginia. And we handled the students who were going through their sophomore year, and they divided that between three weeks with the Marine Corps and three weeks with naval aviation. So, we trained [men] from ROTC units from all over the country. And at the time, Emily, I think we probably had about 46 universities where the NROTCs were located. And I remember being kind of depressed.

But, a good friend of mine was down at Columbia [University, New York, NY] and he described his experience. Number one, they wouldn't even let them wear their uniforms at Columbia. And he had to commute from some naval ammunition depot. It took him two hours to get to work, couldn't wear his uniform. And then I thought back on my own experience. I could be out running in the woods [laughter] in two or three minutes. So, I stopped feeling sorry for myself, counted my blessings that being at Dartmouth was a good place. And besides, they had already decided that we would continue, you know, at least for a couple more years. But for a while we thought we might be ending the program right away. But, that never came to pass.

And that year was the year that Dartmouth celebrated its, I think it was 300th anniversary. That's when Lord Dartmouth came over. And I know that was kind of a big year. And that's the year that President Dickey, I think, stepped down, and President [John G.] Kemeny took over. This is '69. And my friend, Steve Duncan, left the Navy and went back to law school at Colorado. Lat er on, Steve became the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs during President [Ronald] Reagan's last two years and during the four years that Bush 1 [George H.W. Bush] was President. So, he was six years as an Assistant Secretary of Defense, and he was there on the faculty with me and would also be a great person to interview. We'll talk about that. I'll give you his contact information later on.

SMID: Okay. Thank you.

STEELE: So, also then, we also left college housing. We bought a house out in Etna, right on [inaudible] Road, and enjoyed that, and we had many good friends and neighbors. So we had, you know, lots of, far more positive experiences than we had… The only negative was I think one time—and by the way, when we used to graduate our students, and because they might be interrupted, we always swore them in the day before, so that if the ceremony in which they were participating in was disrupted, we could just say, "Dismissed, and carry out your orders," and they had already been sworn in. And nobody ever did that. I think one time our tree got TPed, you know, toilet papered, and I think at one time I had some tires of mine deflated out near our house. But that was about it. We were always, generally in good graces. And as a Scoutmaster, a lot of the faculty I came to know, because

even though their sons, they might be progressives and be on the opposite side of the argument about ROTC, we always got along because I had their sons in the Boy Scouts.

SMID: So, I think that this is a good place for us to stop for now, because I know that probably you have more to say. So, I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording.

[End of Part 1 of Interview.]

This is Emily Smid. I am at Rauner [Special Collections] Library at Dartmouth College in Hanover, New Hampshire. Today is the 25th of October, 2016, and I am interviewing General Orlo Steele, who is in Grass Valley, California. This is part 2 of his interview, and this interview is for the Dartmouth Vietnam Project.

STEELE: Right. And you have that as Grass Valley, right?

SMID: Yes, Grass Valley. So, last time we were talking, we left off right around the Parkhurst takeover in 1969 at Dartmouth, and go ahead.

STEELE: Let me just kind of correct something that I wasn't able to remember during our first session, and this is when I was in the Officer Candidate Course at Quantico, Virginia, and I had been enlisted and now I was going through an officer commissioning program in 1956. And I wanted to let you know that—it's not a big thing, but I bunked with a person who became really a lifelong friend. His name was Bill Brennan. And Bill had gone to Colgate in northern New York, and his father was on the New Jersey Supreme Court. And just about the time we graduated and were commissioned, President [Dwight D.] Eisenhower appointed his father onto the Supreme Court of the United States, and he became Justice William Brennan. Bill himself also went into the law after he left the Marine Corps, and also had a distinguished career as a lawyer. But I just wanted to mention we became lifelong friends and his parents were very, very kind to me when we were at The Basic School in Quantico, and would have me up for things like Thanksgiving at their residence. And I remember one Saturday being with Bill and his dad arranged for us to go to the Court on a Saturday morning, and there were about six or seven of the Justices were working on Saturday morning, and we got a complete tour of the Supreme Court. And that was really kind of heady stuff for a kid from Grass Valley who had never been further east

than Phoenix, Arizona, you know. That was—I remember those things very well. Anyway, I just wanted to mention that as part of my Marine Corps story.

SMID: So, did you and Bill serve together after Quantico? Or you just were bunkmates?

STEELE: Oh, we were bunkmates, and then he came out here. He became a tanker, and went to tank school at Camp Pendleton, California. I became an infantry officer. But he came on his way to tank school, stayed with me for about three or four days, and then he went off to tank school and I went off to the Far East. So, in our time in the Marine Corps, we did not serve together, but we did get together later on in life, particularly when I was serving in Washington, DC.

So, let me now kind of return back to Dartmouth College. In 1969, we talked about that they had come to a decision about the future of ROTC, and somewhere around March, I'm not sure, is when they announced that and that's when that was unsatisfactory with the SDS at least, and the other students, and that's when they stormed Parkhurst Hall, and took it and held it. And I remember that there was a lot of students outside at night and the TV cameras and everything else. And then, as I told you, they waited until about 4:00 in the morning when it was very cold and everybody had disappeared, and that's when the law enforcement arrived and broke in and took them out.

SMID: I didn't ask you this last time, but I wondered how—I asked how you felt about the takeover, but I forgot to ask how exactly your ROTC students responded to it and if they were a little bit disdainful or if they kind of…

STEELE: Well, you know, we thought it was unfortunate, particularly, we really liked President Dickey, you know, and he was in his last year after a distinguished career with the State Department, and then his 25 years as the president of Dartmouth, and he was going to be stepping down in a few months. And we thought that was unfortunate. And also, the dean of men was taken out and he was well liked. So I think most of the students felt like I did that it was unfortunate and certainly unnecessary. But, I guess they had to express themselves. That was kind of one of the only incidents that really took place during my three years at Dartmouth involving the SDS or anybody objecting to our presence on

the campus in the three years. Now, I was there from October of 1968 until I left in June of 1971 to go to Marine Corps Command and Staff College [Quantico, VA], but those were the years I was there.

SMID: Okay.

STEELE: 1969, then, was that particular incident. And I should also mention that one of the things that took place, as you know, [Richard M.] Nixon became the President in January of 1969. And soon after he took office, he appointed a commission called the Gates Commission, and their task was to study the alternatives to conscription, or the Draft, that was then, as you know, one of the sore points, particularly with students. And the Gates Commission looked at three alternatives. Now, one was continue the Draft as it was. Another one was to stop the Draft and go to an all-volunteer—what became known as an all-volunteer force. And then there was a third option that was kind of something in-between, and that was continue two years of government service, but that might be the military or it might be something else, such as going into the Peace Corps, VISTA, you know, one of those programs, that everybody would have two years of service. And during times of national emergency, why, it would be weighted towards the military, and during times of peace it would be weighted towards these other forms. And that was reported out in February of 1970, and frankly, President Nixon was already predisposed to ending the Draft, and so that's what he chose. And they announced that. And it was another year before they ended it. In fact, I don't think they really ended it until about 1973, but they went to a lottery system. And I mention this because this had quite a bit to do with kind of defusing student feelings about the war.

SMID: The war.

STEELE: And that all took place then.

SMID: So, you were still at Dartmouth at the time?

STEELE: I was still at Dartmouth when they announced that, but the draft still continued, but they had shifted to a lottery system the next year, I think it was by 1972, and they took kind of a much smaller percentage, and it was people with certain birthdates that they did a selection. And with those you got

drafted, and if you were not one of those, you were not subject to the Draft.

SMID: Did you agree with that change?

STEELE: You know, as I look back on it, yes, I do today. At the time I didn't know what to think. You know, just for your information on the subject of conscription, that has never really been a tradition in the United States. In fact, if you look back on it, we only had conscription or a draft for a total of 39 years in our history. We drafted two years during the American Civil War, we drafted two years during World War I, and then they started the Draft as storm clouds were on the horizon in 1940. That's when they did the first conscription. It was only really to be a year. And in 1941 the House of Representatives renewed it for another year, and it passed by one vote in the House of Representatives. And so that's, we had the Draft then started really in 1940, and until it was discontinued in 1973 forever. So it's only been 39 years that we've had a draft. Are you aware of that? I don't know.

SMID: Yes.

STEELE: Okay. So, anyway, he was disposed on that. For myself, personally, you know, I'd kind of grown up with the Draft. I was eight years old when it started, and it was very much in when I was in college, which was during the Korean War. And so, we had always had kind of the Draft. So, I thought it was a rather dramatic change. And we weren't sure exactly how we were going to be getting our—it turned out to be after several years of struggling with it and changing our recruiting habits, it turned out to be a far better system.

SMID: Well, how did the students on campus at the time react?

STEELE: Favorably, I think, generally. And it also did much to kind of ease the tension that was going on, particularly over the war. Now, Nixon had promised that he was going to eventually end the war, but he continued the same practices as the previous administration as far as troop strengths were concerned, but he also kind of widened the war somewhat. We had some operations in Laos, and then in 19…

SMID: 1970?

STEELE: 1970, right. In April, the Vietnamese and US forces also invaded into Cambodia to knock out the NVA sanctuaries that were there in Cambodia. And that, of course, kicked off, everybody was then—he was widening the war, and so that put greater stress again. And then, that was in April, and in May of 1970 was the Kent State [University, Kent, OH] riots, which it ended up the National Guard shooting into the crowd and killing a handful of students there. And that really touched off the campuses. There wasn't anything demonstrably going on at Dartmouth, but essentially all the schools kind of shut down between then and the end of the year. There were—classes were suspended throughout.

SMID: Did students go on strike at all?

STEELE: Well, they didn't go on strike on campus, but they were permitted to go down to Washington and demonstrate and that sort of thing, so their classes were simply suspended without penalty. We continued to have our classes. I had my students because I had to get them ready for summer camp and that sort of thing. But, and they didn't go down to Washington. They stayed. But other than that, I don't know what other classes [laughter] they may have been going to. And I was getting them in shape. We used to go on long hikes up in the White Mountains, and then also I taught them mountaineering subjects. Over near Norwich [VT], there was some cliff faces, and I used to teach them rock climbing and things like that, knots and other courses. But, we did not run our normal curriculum, even for our own students.

SMID: So, did hearing about Kent State change how you felt about the continuation of the war effort in Vietnam? After having served and been supportive of it, did that change the way that you felt at all?

STEELE: No, it didn't. You know, when I left Vietnam, I thought we were winning. And indeed, if you look at the real history, the wind was out of the sails of the NVA, the North Vietnamese [Army], and there are people who write even today, said they were up against it, and they weren't really doing that much. And also by then, President Nixon had started what they called the Vietnamization of the war, which was to increase the amount of troops really from the Vietnamese themselves, and thereby reduce the number of Americans. And that process had already started. By 1971, for example, the next year, all of the Marine forces were out of Vietnam. There

were still some Army and there were still some, but it had pretty much been taken over by the Vietnamization.

And along with that also was the efforts, initially secret, but viewed by [Henry] Kissinger and the Paris Peace Talks in order to probably come to some sort of negotiated settlement. So, whatever Nixon was doing, if he thought the North Vietnamese were just trying to delay for time, then he would do something dramatic on the battlefield in order to persuade them, whether that was increase the bombing, go into Laos, go into Cambodia; whatever it was, he was kind of upping the ante. And we kind of saw that. And he wanted, as he claimed, to end the war, but to do it with honor. So, I was in his corner, as a number of people were; particularly a lot of working class people supported him on that. Does that answer your question?

SMID: Yes, it did. So, then, what was the aftermath of Kent State like at Dartmouth? So, for a period of time students were permitted to go protest and…

STEELE: There were no protests at Dartmouth. We had our commissioning ceremonies at the end of the year. They were not disrupted at all. Everything just kind of [laughter] quieted down. Now, I guess a number of them went off to other places. And by the way, most of the—when Dartmouth would have kind of a greater amount of demonstrations, it was usually backed up with a lot of people from outside, and they would not come up during the wintertime. So, those kind of took place in either September or in May. But, we were not the focal point in May. That was elsewhere, you know, on the other campuses, but not at Dartmouth.

SMID: And so, the remainder of your time at Dartmouth, which was short-lived, you'd said that you were only there until 1970, right?

STEELE: 1971 I left.

SMID: Oh, '71.

STEELE: So, a total of two-and-a-half years, a little over two-and-a-half years. So, in the meantime, the Army and the Air Force had decided in that last year after 1970 not to continue their programs. In fact, the number of students they had left, I kind of became their advisor and counselor if they had any issues

with the ROTC. But the Air Force and the Army really pulled stakes and did not continue there then. The Navy, however, decided to take the opposite view, and they were going to stay with their students until the last ones were graduated, which was in 1972, I guess. And I left in 1971, and my classes were taken over by my assistant, who by the way ended up getting a college degree almost by taking courses at Dartmouth.

SMID: At Dartmouth? Wow.

STEELE: Uh-huh. And by the way, and I, too, was able to take a couple of courses while I was there for…

SMID: What courses did you take?

STEELE: Oh, "The Anatomy of Revolution." I forget, it was one of the history professors. And another history course. But I was able to get—I never got a master's, but I was able to do them. My good friend, Steve Duncan, took courses and got a master's in government or political science. He left in 1970 in June, but he was able to do that. And we were encouraged to go ahead and interact, so I enjoyed that. And I told you also, you know, I became the Scoutmaster in town, so I got to know a lot of people that way. Cathy and I are Episcopalians, my wife and I, so we attended church along with our children at the Episcopal church there as you come up from Norwich. I can't remember what street that is. And, in fact, I became a member of the vestry for two years.

SMID: The vestry? I'm not sure I know what that is.

STEELE: Oh, the vestry is kind of like the church elders. They're elected by the congregation and it's made up of junior wardens, senior wardens, and treasurers and that sort of thing, and they're members of the vestry. But anyway, what I'm just trying to kind of show you is that, you know, our family, we integrated very nicely in the town and we were accepted. And as I told you, I never received any abuse at all. I think the only ones who ever did, I think there were two Army recruiters somewhere during my time then, I can't remember, it was probably around 1970, who might have had a bad time from students when they tried to set up their booth someplace on the campus there. But we wore our uniforms there, went to classes, went to drills, you know, and

seemed to be accepted within the community, both by the students, as well as members of the community and faculty.

SMID: And were you disappointed that Dartmouth did away with its ROTC program? And I think you mentioned last time that Stanford did, as well.

STEELE: Yeah. I was disappointed. And I'm told that in 1972, Dartmouth came very close—you know, the Navy had stayed, and I learned this from Captain Hirsch, who was our professor of naval science who eventually stayed and retired in Hanover, and in fact, his widow is still there. He has since passed away. But, he stayed and became the administrator for Dick's House, which was kind of the health clinic.

SMID: It's still here.

STEELE: Yeah. [laughter] And he said, you know, that Dartmouth almost reversed itself. And then in 1972, they had what they called the Easter Offensive, and that's when the North Vietnamese tried to take over the South, and unsuccessfully, and there was this Easter Offensive, and that kind of highlighted the war again, and so it kind of—maybe if that hadn't happened, Dartmouth might have reversed itself. Now, the only two—afterwards, the only two Ivy League schools that kept their programs were Cornell [University, Ithaca, NY] and Penn [University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA]. And one of those, I think, had voted to get rid of it, but had reversed itself, and I think it was probably Cornell. But as far as I know… Now, since then, I think Harvard [University, Cambridge, MA] has adopted a program, but that was it. Stanford and the rest of them have not.

And I'll say this also, not only where we seemed to be well accepted and we were very visible and wore our uniforms and everything else, but in other places that was not true. Places like Wisconsin, I know, they were given a very bad time. And I have a very close friend who was my counterpart, the Marine officer instructor, at the University of Washington in Seattle. And in his case the same time, around 1970, I think, the students broke into the ROTC building and grabbed members of the staff and grabbed him, and drug him down three stories down the stairs—and ripped his uniform, ended up ripping his uniform—by his legs. And he still has back problems today from that.

SMID: What was his name?

STEELE: Carter Swinser. And he's retired in South Carolina today. But, he and his wife were the ones who introduced my wife and myself. We've been close friends. And so, he really—you know, that happened to some people. Now, Stanford, my old school, I think they didn't do it while anybody was there, I think they firebombed the ROTC building.

SMID: Wow. So, Dartmouth was relatively benign.

STEELE: So, Dartmouth was relatively benign, yes. It certainly was. And I attribute that to, you know, the students were, I don't know, I'm sure there were stronger feelings, but I don't think, it wasn't like the hotbed that they had in Columbia. That was the one where they had students sat in in the administrative—and became kind of focal points nationally. In the Ivy League, I think, perhaps Columbia was the one that was strongest in their opposition.

SMID: So, I guess then, after leaving Dartmouth, were you disappointed to have to go and especially to leave in such a time where I guess it would seem that the legacy of your program was kind of looked down upon, and then also, where did you move on from Dartmouth?

STEELE: Well, we kind of felt that we went out with our heads up high. We saw all of our students through, and they were good students, and many of them continued on to do good things, and I told you some I had run into them on the Navy side who became senior officers. And no, I felt very good. It was about we loved the community and the outdoor sports. The children thrived while they were there and the schools were good. We skied as a family and had wonderful times while we were there. And so, we kind of felt good about the time that we were there, and that was very worthwhile.

Also, the courses I taught, it gave me a chance to really study the profession of arms in a serious way. You know, when you have to teach a subject, you really get pretty good at it. And so, that was on the plus side for me personally also to be able to study my own profession in a more intellectual way than I had ever been able to do before. And, so we felt good about being at Dartmouth, and would go back periodically, and we still do. So, we had some very good

friends. We still have good friends who we met. He's a retired doctor, but he was a dermatologist that taught at the medical school by the name of Baughman, Dr. [Richard D.] Baughman and his wife. We're still very close and we visit with them and exchange Christmas cards to this day, and visit them when we're up in New England, and like that part of the world.

SMID: So, another question I have for you is if you continue to keep in contact with the people you served with in Vietnam, and if so, what your interactions have been like since you served together?

STEELE: Oh, indeed we have. One of the lieutenants that I took into Hue City as a replacement officer who had just graduated from the Naval Academy—and this is in 1968, and I took him into Hue, and he was going into one of the—and I was the executive officer of the battalion. And I'd come up driving up—I went back to Phu Bai where our rear was, and it was about 12 miles. This 2nd lieutenant later became the Chairman, the first Marine to become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. His name is Peter Pace. And anyway, I took 2nd lieutenant Peter Pace into Hue City. And we remained friends over the years.

And three years ago when we went back to Vietnam, Peter Pace was on the tour with us. There was about 40 of us, all who had been there during the Tet Offensive and generally were in either 2.5, the battalion I was in, or one of the other battalions that was there. So, Ron Christmas, who I took off who got wounded during the battle, later became a lieutenant general, and he and I have remained friends ever since then. General Mike Downs who had Fox company. Ernie Cheatham who had the battalion, he and I remained very, very close until he died about five or six years ago. But generally, everybody that we… The Marine Corps is a very small number, and a lot of us, we [laughter] know each other. And so, we stay close and stay in contact. We have means of doing that. We have a directory that came out for all the retired general officers, so we know where everybody is. And when one of them dies, it comes up from headquarters of the Marine Corps on the internet that he'd passed away. So, in answer of your question, we remained as a very close community.

SMID: So, what was it like being back in Vietnam? And did you go to the places where you had served during the Tet Offensive?

STEELE: Yes.

SMID: You mentioned last time it was right on the border between Laos and Vietnam.

STEELE: We went to all those places. And initially I told you I served in Da Nang. We went to where the division headquarters was, and you couldn't find that place, but we went up to all the places in the outlying areas to Chu Lai, to a place called An Hoa (that's A-n- H-o-a), where I ended up in an area that all of us had ended up. And to Hoi An, and then up to Phu Bai and Hue, and eventually up along the DMZ. And everywhere we were…

SMID: Demilitarized Zone?

STEELE: Yeah, it's Demilitarized Zone. It was the boundary between North and South Vietnam. And that's where the heavy fighting was. I was not up there. I was in the 1st Division, which did not go that far north. That was all up in the 3rd Marine Division zone of operations. But, and then afterwards we went up for three days at Hanoi. So, we were there for a little over two weeks, and we were very impressed by what we saw. We were treated extremely well. The [laughter] Vietnamese really seemed to like Americans. And they still don't like the French. And they don't trust the Chinese. But they really like Americans. And as a matter of fact, we had our pictures taken. There was a number of former NVA who were down at Hue probably for the same reason we were. You know, they were probably celebrating the fight down there from their point of view, and several were in their Army uniforms, were generals, senior officers. We had our pictures taken together, smiling.

SMID: Wow. That's pretty amazing.

STEELE: [laughter] Yeah. Even in Hanoi we were well received, as well. And it's also, it's nice to see the prosperity that has come in. They're a very industrious people, and so they are working hard and doing quite well. And the number of tourists are many. And it's a nice place. It's an economic

place to visit, and it's a nice—good accommodations, and it was very nice to be there. We all enjoyed it.

SMID: So, I guess by way of conclusion, I wondered if, you know, you served in so many different places and you wore so many hats, and for the purposes of what I'm researching, the Dartmouth Vietnam Project, I wondered, you know, was your experience—I mean, I'm sure each of your experiences were unique, but what do you think differentiated your service in Vietnam from every other place that you served, whether it's just like the physical place of being there and it feeling different, or the type of fighting that you were doing, or the kind of emotions around it?

STEELE: Well, at least when I was in the battalion I was in, probably the most intense fighting was in Hue. But, what I remember about that is that I've never been in an outfit where morale was quite as high as that. I mean, people, you know, it used to be– when you got wounded, you went back and maybe you got a wound and they sent you back to a hospital ship, or maybe even if it was severe enough, it was back to Japan or to the United States. Guys would get wounded, and then they'd run back to the aid station and said, "Patch me up, Doc, I've gotta back in the fight." I mean, they didn't want to be out. They wanted to be there. It was a knock down, drag out fight. And Marine morale was very, very high. So, I'll never forget that. And then, we continued to train very hard, although maybe other times we never had to do any fighting; nevertheless, we always worked very hard to prepare to be ready for that, whatever next fight came along later on when I was a battalion commander or a brigade commander.

We, the Marine Corps, and the Army went through a very, very difficult time right after Vietnam. Again, we had gone to the all-volunteer force, but we our recruiting was difficult. And during the war, during the [Lyndon B.] Johnson Administration, they had—you know, he had had the war against poverty [War on Poverty], and as a part of that, they drafted a number of people into the services who should have been, were really in previous times had been disqualified, and it was called Project 100,000, and they kind of split between the Army and the Marine Corps, particularly in our infantry units. And these were people who didn't have the reading skills, you know, maybe had dropped out of school after the seventh or eighth grade, and yet they were taken in the service, and we had a very, very difficult time

with them. Our textbooks are all written for the 11th grade and here were people who couldn't read or write. A number of those people ended up being disciplinary problems after boot camp and that sort of thing, and it took us about three or four years after the Vietnam War to weed ourselves out of that.

And then eventually, as we went into the all-volunteer force, we started raising our own standards so that you had to be a high school graduate, you know, by 1973 or so. But when I took a battalion of 800, I think I had 55 people who were in an unauthorized absence status. And that wasn't uncommon. Throughout the Marine Corps we probably had 5,000 or 6,000 Marines, a brigade's worth, that we couldn't lay our hands on in any given day, because they were UA. And we also had the people who were coming back who had gone to Canada or gone to Sweden or who had deserted and that sort of thing and they had to be handled. And, so we had a difficult time right after the war. And it took us about five or six years to kind of get that corrected. And we did it slowly, raising the standards. We never compromised on our officer corps. We always kept that strong. But, below the officers we didn't have enough staff NCOs because we'd commissioned a lot of them during the war, and so we had the next guy down was a corporal.

SMID: And you think that was a result of what happened in Vietnam?

STEELE: Yeah, yeah. And the fact that people, you know, there was this, parents didn't want their kids going into the service and things like that, there was part of the… And the person who eventually turned that around was President [Ronald] Reagan, almost singlehandedly when he made it a, you know… Yeah, what happened, we really started recruiting again from the middle class.

SMID: Do you think it's back today as you remember it and as it should be?

STEELE: Oh, it's even better. But, the fact is that only less than 1% of our entire population or people who are eligible are actually in the service. That's all we can handle. But we only have, and we're getting all and the quality we've always wanted, but it only represents less than 1% of your contemporaries.

SMID: Wow. Well, you've answered all the questions I have for you, so is there anything else that you'd like to say, whether it's about the war or your Dartmouth experience or anything?

STEELE: No.

SMID: No, okay.

STEELE: Well, one of your Dartmouth graduates who graduated in about 2000, 2001 or '02, anyway, wrote a great book about his time in the Marine Corps. He enlisted. Every once in a while we get students still from the Ivy League. And we always have gotten good students out of the Ivy League. As a matter of fact, from Dartmouth when I was there, you know, they had in World War II it was almost everybody was in either the ROTC or what they called the V-12 program, and I think we've had over the years at least nine Marine generals come out who were graduates of Dartmouth College. And there's probably [more] if you had all the Ivy League. So, we've gotten some wonderful students out of there. When the Navy…

SMID: So they're doing something right here.

STEELE: Pardon me?

SMID: They're doing something right up here.

STEELE: Yes. Now, when the Navy and the Army went out of all the Ivy Leagues except the two that I mentioned, Cornell and Princeton, they ended up going back and opening up units which they had not had before. This is just the Navy now. And they ended up establishing a Navy Reserve Officer Training unit up at Norwich College [Norwich University, Northfield, VT], which is a military college, and they went into VMI, Virginia Military Institute, the Citadel, Texas A&M, and I think a black college in Florida which was a military college. And they ended up shifting to get students out of those colleges, which has worked out pretty well for us. And that's how they made up the deficit when they lost the Ivy League.

[Recording ends here.]

[End of Interview.]