Nicholas J. Steffen ’66
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
The Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Mim Eisenberg/WordCraft

FARKAS: This is Sandor Farkas interviewing Nicholas Steffen. I am in Dartmouth College’s Webster Hall, and Nicholas Steffen is at his home in Henderson, Nevada. It is 4:05 p.m., August 12th, 2015.

So, Nicholas Steffen, can you tell me where you were born and who your parents were?

STEFFEN: Okay, I was born in Winona, Minnesota. My parents were Robert and Betty Steffen.

FARKAS: And what year were you born in?

STEFFEN: I was born October 20th, 1944.

FARKAS: Interesting. And can you tell me more about your parents—like, what their jobs were?

STEFFEN: My mother was a homemaker, and my father worked in the investment business, selling mutual funds.

FARKAS: Interesting. Did your father ever serve in the military?

STEFFEN: He was in the [U.S.] Navy, an enlisted sailor in the Navy in World War II.

FARKAS: And do you know when he got out?

STEFFEN: He was medically discharged I believe in 1943 or so.

FARKAS: Ah, so he was around in 1944 when you were born?

STEFFEN: Yeah. Yeah, he’d already been discharged when I was born.

FARKAS: So tell me about kind of your early school days—elementary—what your interests were, how you did in school.

STEFFEN: Okay. Yeah, I grew up in a small Midwestern city, and so all of the schools I went to—elementary, junior high school (they didn't call them middle schools in those days) and senior high school—were actually all within walking distance of the house and were actually close enough that I actually used to walk home for lunch all through school, from kindergarten till the time I went away to Dartmouth.

Yeah, it was a real pleasant childhood. Normal type activities. A lot of our outdoor playing. Not much TV back in those days. We didn't get a TV until I was, I believe, in ninth or tenth grade. So when I wasn't playing outdoors, I was indoors reading a lot, which gave me I think an interest in historical stuff and especially in stuff about World War II. So my interests in school were primarily in the science, the science fields and that.

FARKAS: So growing up in town—I mean, being born in 1944, I'm assuming there were a lot of World War II veterans, but can you tell me about the contact you had with returning World War II veterans or if you had any?

STEFFEN: No. I mean, back in those days I think, you know, most able-bodied males served, but it just wasn't—you know, it wasn't a big deal, I guess. So by the time I was old enough to be kind of aware [chuckles] of what was going on, the war was over. And as far as I know—plus a lot of my parents'—for whatever reason—my parents' friends were older than they were, so they may not have served. I really don't even know.

FARKAS: Now, were there any famous veterans or pilots or Navy men (as, you know, you later went in the Navy) that you knew or were aware of in your town?

STEFFEN: Yeah, actually there was. There's a very famous aviator—t least he was famous back then—called [Maximilian] "Max" Conrad, who set all sorts of aviation records flying small aircraft. I believe he didn't work for the Piper Aircraft [Inc.] company. I don't know that he was ever in the military. But some of the people that had taken flying lessons from him went on to go in the military.

There was a book—and I'm trying to think of the name of it—it may have been *A Yank in the R.A.F.* or something. But anyway, about this American who joined the R.A.F. to fight in World War II, and he had learned to fly from this Max

Conrad. And I met the individual as a child and was actually given a chance to go flying with him, but I was only, like, four years old [chuckles]. I wasn't brave enough, so I turned him down, much to my everlasting regret.

FARKAS: Did you get to meet Max Conrad?

STEFFEN: Yes, I did. Like I said, I did meet him. My dad knew him. He was approximately my father's age. And being a small, fairly small town, you know, almost—not quite that everybody knew everybody, but it was close. And so my dad was visiting one time near his airplane, and he asked me if I wanted to go up for a ride, but I said no. [Laughs.] Like I said, I was only four years old.

FARKAS: So in terms of your father's own service record in the Navy, you said you're not sure quite how your father knew him, but do you know much about what your father did in the Navy?

STEFFEN: Yeah, he worked on—he was assigned to the [U.S.] Naval Research Lab[oratory] in Washington, D.C., and was working on developing radar, which was, of course, brand new back then, so he did a lot of—he was an electronics technician, so he was doing work with radar back then.

FARKAS: And did you have any other family members who you specifically recall having served or told you stories about having served?

STEFFEN: Well, my uncle, my father's brother, was a lieutenant in the [U.S.] Army, and I believe was stationed in Australia, but I never really talked to him much about that at all. And my two other uncles on my mother's side—one of them was a bombardier-navigator in the [U.S.] Army Air Corps, and, quite frankly, I don't know very much about what his service was. And then her younger brother served in the Navy as an enlisted man during the Korean [War] era, but I don't think he was ever over by Korea.

FARKAS: Interesting. Now, can you tell me more about your mother, what kind of a person she is? You know, maybe she was involved in other things around town?

STEFFEN: Well, prior to getting married—my mother was from the Iron Range in Minnesota. And looking back on it, I wish I would have asked her more questions. Neither of my parents are

alive now. But when she was a young woman, she left Minnesota and went out to California and ended up working as a secretary for Lockheed [Corporation, now part of Lockheed Martin] at their Burbank plant.

And I remember her telling me stories about—back in those days, they had blackout restrictions for the West Coast cities, and the night that she left L.A. [Los Angeles] to fly back to Minnesota, they had lifted the blackout, and she could see the lights of L.A. for the first time. She was only out there for probably about a year or two. And to be honest with you, I have no idea what prompted her [chuckles], a young woman from northern Minnesota, to head off to Los Angeles back in the early '40s. She didn't know anybody out there, to the best of my knowledge, so I have no idea why she decided to go out there.

FARKAS: That's sounds quite adventurous.

STEFFEN: Yeah.

FARKAS: So it sounds like your father—your father was in the Navy, and your mother was involved certainly in some type of aeronautics stuff. Do you think that had any influence on your decision to join the Navy and become a naval aviator?

STEFFEN: Not the naval aviator portion of it, because my mother was a secretary, so she was, I mean—could have ended up being a secretary for a car company, you know, as far as—but certainly my dad being in the Navy I think influenced me to want a career in the Navy. And, as I mentioned before, I read a lot of books, some novels but mostly historical books about World War II. I read a lot of—a lot of stuff about the Navy, the different aspects of it, and it just seemed like something that really appealed to me.

FARKAS: Interesting. I'd love to come back to that in a minute, but do you know anything about your family history of where your parents came from, grandparents?

STEFFEN: Yeah. It's funny you should ask that, because I've been doing some genealogy just recently. My father's people were from Luxembourg, Germany and Prussia on my grandfather's side, but on his mother's side—kind of interesting—I started tracing them back, and it looks like I was able to trace them back to Colonial America, back to the

1620s. One of them was—apparently was Deacon [William] Peck. And then I went even farther back to England. It turns out that there are Norman knights in the family tree, and I was able to get across the [English] Channel over to France. Long story short, apparently—I wouldn't swear to this because I don't know how accurate the research was and I'm just piggybacking on other people's family trees—but I may possibly be a descendent from Charlemagne as well as Rollo, the Viking.

FARKAS: Very interesting.

STEFFEN: I found that [chuckles]—I found that kind of fascinating, so I've been trying to bone up on my European history, which was not ever my strong suit.

FARKAS: And on your mother's side?

STEFFEN: My mother's side. Her mother was Norwegian. Her parents were born in Norway. Her father was adopted, so it was a little hard to really figure out, but his parents were born in Ireland.

FARKAS: Now, did you—

STEFFEN: That's as far back as we've been able to trace anything.

FARKAS: Yeah, so with such recent immigrants on your mother's side, did she speak any of those languages, have any cultural kind of holdouts from the fact that her parents were immigrants?

STEFFEN: No, she didn't. And all of my grandparents were born in this country, so, yeah, the language— Occasionally, I think my grandmother would be known to curse in Norwegian, but—[Laughs.] But anyway, yeah, all of my grandparents were-were born in—in this country, so—

FARKAS: Now, in a small town like Winona—

STEFFEN: Mm-hm.

FARKAS: Can you tell me about what politics were like and also your family politics? Was the town generally liberal, conservative? How did it kind of view various issues?

STEFFEN: My family was very conservative politically. The town in general was—that region of Minnesota is fairly conservative. At least it was back then. Minnesota in general is a fairly liberal state, but that congressional district traditionally went Republican.

FARKAS: Interesting. Now, was your family particularly religious?

STEFFEN: No. They used to take my brother and myself and drop us off at Sunday School [chuckles] and they'd come back home, so, yeah, we were required to go to Sunday School, but they did not go to church, you know, normally.

FARKAS: What church would that be?

STEFFEN: I was raised in the Episcopal faith or the Episcopal Church.

FARKAS: So, now, going into high school, you said you were very interested in history, especially World War II history. You also said you read a lot of books. Did that—did you feel like you were more academically engaged or interested in that than your classmates?

STEFFEN: Yeah. Yeah, I was always I guess kind of considered a little bit of a—back in those days, the term was "bookworm." I guess now it might be called a "nerd" or something like that. But, yeah.

FARKAS: And, so, [unintelligible] history was your, your primary or most—your favorite subject?

STEFFEN: I'm sorry, could you repeat that?

FARKAS: Yeah. Was history your favorite subject?

STEFFEN: No, the science classes were always my favorite subject.

FARKAS: So the history was more something you did in your spare time?

STEFFEN: Yeah, exactly. Yeah, just—that way I pick the particular areas that I was interested in. As I've gotten older, I've become more interested in history in general, but back then it was primarily—for some reason, I was just really interested in World War II. Of course, it wasn't—you know, when I was

10 years old, it was only, like, five, six years after the war, so—

FARKAS: And were there any particular clubs or favorite teachers or classes you remember from high school?

STEFFEN: Well, as far as clubs go, I was in the drama club, the science club. I'm trying to think of what else I was in. But I was also out for sports as well, so—

FARKAS: What sports?

STEFFEN: I'm not a very big person, so [chuckles] that kind of limited me to what sports, so in the fall I was the manager of the football team, the student manager of the football team. But in the winter I was a diver on the swimming team.

FARKAS: Oh, interesting.

STEFFEN: And then one year—one year I was out for track in the spring, but I attempted to become a pole vaulter, but the coach was only either interested or knowledgeable about coaching the track events and not the field events, so we were pretty much on our own, so I wasn't able to teach myself how to pole vault, so after one season of that, I gave that up.

FARKAS: Now, do you remember how you got on with your fellow classmates? Any particular friendships from there that maybe carried over to Dartmouth or throughout the rest of your life?

STEFFEN: Yeah, I still—I stayed in touch with a couple of my high school classmates. Some of them have already, unfortunately, passed on. And strangely enough, as small high school as I went to, I think our graduating class was only—I think it was less than 250 people in our graduating class. Two of my classmates went to Dartmouth with me, so there were three of us from our small high school at Dartmouth at the same time, in the same class, the Class of '66 there, so—

FARKAS: That's almost unheard of now. So do you think you were generally considered popular? Can you tell me about the groups you hung out with in high school?

STEFFEN: I didn't hang out with the, for lack of a better term, I guess, the "cool" gang, the jocks or whatever. It was more the—more the—the guys that—the academic types, but all of us were out for sports, so it wasn't like—yeah, we were all either on the swimming team or, you know, something—something like wrestling or something like that. So we were all engaged in sports, but we were probably considered more, I guess, the brainier kids, for lack of a better term, or the good kids as opposed to the jocks or something like that.

Things back in those days, especially back in the Midwest—I don't think we were quite, you know, as clique-ish as they may have been in other times or other places.

FARKAS: So, now, going up to around your junior and senior year, when you're starting to think about college, can you tell me about what *you* wanted to do, what your parents wanted you to do? Did you definitely know you wanted to go into college?

STEFFEN: Oh, yeah, there was never any question in my mind that I'd go on to college. I'm sure there was questions in my parents' mind how they were going to be able to pay for it because I did not come from a wealthy family, by any stretch of the imagination. I have actually—starting about ninth grade, when I decided I wanted to become a naval officer—I was shooting for the [U.S.] Naval Academy.

Of course, you need a congressional appointment to go to any of the military academies, and it turned out—and each congressman is only allowed to have—it may have changed by now, but back then I think he was only allowed to have, like, five nominees at the academy at any one time, and that would be for any—you know, not just for one class, but for the entire—you know, going to any particular academy.

And it turned out that my congressman did not have any appointments available whatsoever for that year. He did nominate me for [the U.S. Military Academy at] West Point, and I took the physical for West Point. I don't know how I impressed—how well I impressed the Army people, because when they were interviewing me, they asked me what I wanted to do—if I got selected for West Point, what I wanted to do after graduation, and I said, "Put in for an inter-service transfer to the Navy." [Laughs.] But I wasn't really interested

in going to West Point, so I went the NROTC [Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps] route instead.

FARKAS: So I want to go back when you mentioned—you mentioned that in ninth grade you wanted—you knew you wanted to be a naval officer.

STEFFEN: Yes, I did.

FARKAS: That's—that's pretty early. Can you tell me about that?

STEFFEN: No, it just—prior to that time, I thought I wanted to do something somewhat related to chemistry or pharmacy or something like that. I didn't really know. And then about toward the end of junior high school, I just started deciding that I wanted to be a naval officer.

Now, aviation had not even entered into it at that time. I thought I probably would want to go into submarines, kind of the opposite end of the spectrum there. But, yeah, aviation—it never even crossed my mind.

FARKAS: So—and actually one other question about that time: Did your father go to college, or either of your parents?

STEFFEN: He did. He went to Hobart College and then transferred to the University of Minnesota. And for whatever reason— I never really asked him—well, I asked him, but I never got a straight answer. He didn't graduate. He had, like, one term left to go, and so I don't know what the deal was there, but he did not graduate. My mother went to a junior high school up in the Iron Range—a college, rather.

FARKAS: Now, your father was—was he enlisted or was he an officer?

STEFFEN: He was enlisted. When he was discharged, he was a first class petty officer.

FARKAS: Ah. But that actually reminds me of one thing, which is kind of— for the record, they like to have the acronyms clarified, so can you just remind for posterity what NROTC Is?

STEFFEN: The Naval Reserve Officer [sic; Officers] Training Corps.

FARKAS: Cool. And petty officer is obviously an enlisted rank.

Now, let's see, in your junior year, when you were thinking about places to apply to, you said you applied—you wanted to apply to the Naval Academy but they didn't have an appointment. You ended up getting a nom- —did you get a nomination to West Point?

STEFFEN: Well, I wasn't actually appointed to West Point. I was selected—I don't know what they—I think they called it a nomination—but anyway, to take the physical, so I actually went to Fort Sheridan, Illinois, which is where they were doing the Army physicals for West Point. But I basically told my congressman, "Thanks, but no thanks," that I'd rather go the NROTC route at Dartmouth and go to West Point.

Interesting enough, I got a call—after I was in Dartmouth, I got a call at the dormitory. And, of course, this is back in the days when we just had pay phones in the—we didn't have cell phones in those days. Got a call, and it was from Washington, D.C. It was the congressman's secretary, and she wanted to know if I was still interested in an appointment to the Naval Academy, because he was offering to appoint me the following year. And I asked for a day to think it over and thought it over and turned it down. The Naval Academy does not accept any transfer credits at all, so I would have been starting completely over again, and I just didn't want to do that. I already had a year—it was slightly more than year at Dartmouth under my belt and was due to graduate and be commissioned in 1966, so I didn't want to delay it any longer by starting all over again in what would be the equivalent of a freshman year at the Naval Academy, so—

FARKAS: So do you remember what year your senior year in high school was?

STEFFEN: Do I remember what year it was?

FARKAS: Yes.

STEFFEN: Or what it was like?

FARKAS: No, what year it was.

STEFFEN: Oh, yeah, sure. Yeah, I graduated in 1962.

FARKAS: So when you visited this military installation and you thought about, you know, to take your physical fitness test, and when

you thought about going into the military, kind of looking back at the Korean War, which had just recently happened, what kind of military did you think you were going into?

STEFFEN: Well, back in those days, it was a peacetime military. Of course, the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Bay of Pigs [invasion] and all that hadn't even happened yet, so, yeah, there was a little bit of a Cold War going on, but, yeah, it was basically just a peacetime Navy back in the, you know, late '50s, early '60s type thing, so I didn't really, you know, give a whole lot more thought than that. I mean, I always realized there's a possibility, you know, that there could be a war again, but, yeah, Vietnam hadn't even raised its ugly head back in those days, so—

FARKAS: Did you know where Vietnam was on the map? Do you recall being able—being conscious of that area of Southeast Asia, what was going on there?

STEFFEN: Oh, yeah, yeah, I was aware of it. I primarily knew it or maybe our textbooks in school probably weren't that up to date, but it was French Indochina. So, yeah, I was aware of it. And I certainly heard about the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu [in Vietnam] and all that, but, you know, it didn't mean a whole lot to me [chuckles] back in those days. So, yeah, I was certainly aware of it.

FARKAS: So what did you think of the French, and—what did you think of the French? What did you think of the communists in general, as groups?

STEFFEN: Well, I was certainly raised as just about everybody was back in those days—and I haven't changed my mind a whole lot [chuckles]—that the communists were, you know, not to be trusted and certainly not our friends. And the French had been our allies in the past, so I was certainly—of course, Dien Bien Phu was in '54, so I would have only been about 10 years old at the time, so I probably wasn't super concerned with world events. And, like I said, we didn't—back in those days, we did not have the TV in our house, so it would have been whatever I had heard in school or read in the newspapers, but, yeah, I would have been in favor of the French versus the—versus the communists.

FARKAS: And I had also asked kind of what your impression of the military was. I mean, you had a father in the military, and I

don't know how much he told you about being in the military, and obviously his military experience was much different than yours later would prove to be, but did you feel like the military lifestyle was something you wanted to live—you know, the discipline, the barracks life?

STEFFEN: Yeah. My father always spoke very fondly of his time in the Navy. I didn't really get a chance to talk a whole lot with my uncles about their time in the service. But, yeah, my dad always spoke—he was only in the Navy about three years or so. He enlisted right after [the attack on] Pearl Harbor [Hawaii]. He was fairly old, you know, for an enlistee. He was I think about 28 or so when he was enlisted, so he was always telling me that his fellow recruits at boot camp and all that would always—would call him Pappy. But, yeah, he spoke fondly of his time in the Navy. But, on the other hand, he never saw any action, never went overseas, so he seemed to like his time in Washington, D.C.

FARKAS: Can you tell me about what the college search was like, what you looked for, how you even went back that back then before you had Google?

STEFFEN: Yeah. I had heard about Dart- —our across-the-street neighbor, an attorney, had gone to Dartmouth, so I'd heard about Dartmouth from him. I loved winter sports, growing up in Minnesota, not a whole lot—I guess you don't have to love them, but if you don't [chuckles], you're really limiting what you can do there. So I loved to ski, so I was looking for a place where I could go skiing.

I did not want a—I did not want to go to a huge college. Back in those days, one of the largest in the country was the University of Minnesota. I had no desire to go to a place that had more students than my hometown did. I think even back in those days, I think you had, like, 30, 35,000 students or something like that. So I wasn't really interested in going to a great big state university.

I didn't want to go to the local state college in my hometown. For one thing, they did not offer NROTC anyway. But they weren't, you know, top level academically anyway. I wanted to go to a good school.

So I looked at most of the Ivy League schools. I just liked the fact that Dartmouth was small and a rural thing. I didn't want

to particularly go off to some big city like New York or Boston or someplace like that. I only applied to two colleges. Dartmouth was one, and the other one was—all of this would have been in a big city—was Northwestern [University]. Got accepted at both of them and chose Dartmouth.

FARKAS: Yeah. Was Dartmouth your first choice out of those two?

STEFFEN: Yeah, yeah. Certainly Dartmouth was the first choice.

FARKAS: So in terms of the application process—I'm sure both the application process for Dartmouth and NROTC were both much different back then—and did you have to apply to NROTC ahead of time? Can you tell me about that process?

STEFFEN: Yes, you did. You had to apply to NROTC. You had to be—actually, you had to be accepted kind of like three times. You had to be accepted by NROTC, you had to be accepted by Dartmouth, and then you had to be accepted into the Dartmouth NROTC unit, because I knew—I knew of I think at least one person that had been accepted into NROTC, been accepted into Dartmouth but not into the Dartmouth NROTC. The quota had been filled, so he ended up going [U.S.] Air Force ROTC instead of—because he wanted to go to Dartmouth. So you actually had to be accepted kind of like three ways.

FARKAS: So can you tell me about the contact you had specifically with Dartmouth and NROTC, before you arrived at school?

STEFFEN: I didn't have any contact with Dartmouth NROTC before I got there, so I don't know how the selection process worked. I'm sure it was just people looking at, you know, interviews and, you know—and all that. I did have—somebody from the—well, they weren't active-duty Navy. They had I think volunteers I think had come down from Minneapolis or something like that to interview me for—or maybe I had gone somewhere else for the interview. I don't really remember. Because I do remember going through interviews, one of them which was in my home, and I don't remember—but I remember being interviewed by people from Dartmouth or representing Dartmouth, probably alumni, as well as people interviewing me for the Navy.

FARKAS: Now, actually, I forgot to ask one thing: Did you have siblings?

STEFFEN: Yes, a brother two years younger and a sister twelve years younger.

FARKAS: Oh, interesting. And did you get along well with either or both of them, or none of them?

STEFFEN: I kind of got along social with my younger [chuckles]—younger brother. He still annoys me, but—at times. But, yeah, we certainly stay in contact. And my sister—I stay in frequent contact with her. She was enough younger—she started kindergarten the year I started Dartmouth.

Just a moment. The guy's at the door here. Gotta go—

FARKAS: I'm going to pause the recording, and just tell me when you come back to us.

STEFFEN: All right.

[Recording interruption.]

FARKAS: All right, coming back, this is Sandor Farkas and Nicholas Steffen resuming the interview on August 12th, 2015.

So you were telling me how you were applying to school. You've gone into Dartmouth at this point. Your sibling—your younger brother—what would he be in, a sophomore in high school at that time?

STEFFEN: Yeah, he was a sophomore when I was a senior. And as I started to say before I got interrupted there, my sister started kindergarten the same year that I started Dartmouth. I don't know how the classes start now, but back then I think Dartmouth didn't start until, like, the third week of September or so, so—

FARKAS: Still the same.

STEFFEN: Yeah, okay. So I actually walked my—walked my little sister to kindergarten, to the same school that I went to. It was only about four blocks away. So, yeah—I mean, yeah, we got along fine. I just didn't have a whole lot of contact with her.

You know, she was, you know, four or five years old when I was heading off to college 1,500 miles away, so—

FARKAS: Where did your brother end up going to college?

STEFFEN: He went to one of the local colleges, Winona State. Back in those days, it was Winona State College. It's now Winona State University.

FARKAS: And did he end up serving in Vietnam or serving in any capacity?

STEFFEN: My brother? No, he did not.

FARKAS: All right. So going back to Dartmouth, you've been accepted, and it is, I would guess, mid-, late September. Can you tell me when you left and how you left for Dartmouth?

STEFFEN: Yes. My parents drove me—drove me out there, so—yeah.

FARKAS: You have good parents, very good parents.

STEFFEN: Yeah.

FARKAS: To drive that far.

STEFFEN: A road trip out to New Hampshire, and they got the tour of the campus and see everything, got me settled into the dorm. My first dorm was at—I'm assuming it's still there—Brown [Hall], one of the Choate row [sic; Choate Cluster] dorms.

FARKAS: Possibly. They've kind of—that area has a lot of dorms that I think have since been renamed. Tell me more about when you first got to Dartmouth. Do you remember which way you approached the campus by, coming up over the Ledyard Bridge, from the south, north?

STEFFEN: No, I don't even really remember. We came through Vermont, I know, so I guess we would have probably come over the Ledyard Bridge. That was before the—they didn't have any of the interstates where—in the New Hampshire area did not exist back then. So it would have been the equivalent of all back roads, I guess. We did have the—you know, the New York Turnpike [sic; New York State Thruway] and all that, but the interstate system was nowhere near like

it is now, so I'm not really sure. I think we, you know, came through the center of probably Rutland, Vermont, and White River Junction [Vermont] and came in that way, I suppose.

FARKAS: Do you remember your first impression of the campus, the town?

STEFFEN: No, I really don't. It was maybe a little overwhelming, I guess, but, yeah, I don't have [laughs] any real memory of a first impression.

FARKAS: Had you ever been away from home? Were you nervous about that aspect?

STEFFEN: No, that's the farthest away from home I'd ever been. The only other places I'd been—up to northern Minnesota to go to either visit my grandparents or go to YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association] camp. Used to go to camp—like, a new camp every summer. So, yeah, that's as far away as I'd been except for when I went over to take that Army physical over in the Chicago area, so—yeah.

FARKAS: So you said your parents helped you settle in. Can you tell me more about your dorm, what that first kind of week, orientation was like?

STEFFEN: Yeah, it was kind of—it was kind of hectic, you know, meeting all new people. I remember—I'm sure they probably don't do that these days, but there was a kind of a get-together. The college even paid for either a keg or beer or a bunch of cases of beer or something. Of course, we were all under age, but that didn't seem to bother the college back in those days. That was the first—that was the first time I had ever—ever had more than one beer. I never drank in high school, so—

FARKAS: I must say I'm shocked.

STEFFEN: [Chuckles.]

FARKAS: Not in a bad way, but—so did you have a roommate?

STEFFEN: Yeah, I had a roommate, yeah, and he was from Long Island [New York]. We were just—

FARKAS: Can you tell me more about him?

STEFFEN: No. [Laughs.] He was from Long Island, and he smoked, and I didn't, so that's about all I—you know, we were friendly, but we weren't friends, if you get the distinction.

FARKAS: Yeah, certainly.

STEFFEN: We got along fine, but other than that, we didn't socialize outside of the dormitory, so I don't really know—I got along well with him enough that we agreed to be roommates the following year, but I couldn't—I mean, I remember his name, but I wouldn't be able to tell you what he ended up majoring in or what happened to him or anything else.

FARKAS: If he—

STEFFEN: I think he was in Army ROTC, I believe.

FARKAS: Oh. So actually—especially when there are people, you mentioned, that also served in Vietnam or possibly served in Vietnam, DVP, the Dartmouth Vietnam Project, is very interested to hear their names. Do you think you could tell us his name?

STEFFEN: Yes, it was [Edward F.] "Ed" Brown [Class of 1966].

FARKAS: Ed Brown. And so after that first kind of initial orientation—by the way, did you have a separate orientation week?

STEFFEN: Yeah, I [unintelligible] we did—

FARKAS: —or an orientation period?

STEFFEN: Yeah, we did, but I don't remember—I really don't remember much about it.

FARKAS: Do you remember what classes you took or any of the classes you took that first term?

STEFFEN: Oh, not without bringing up my old transcripts. I think I took some—I think I took a chemistry course because I was intending to be—at that time, I was intending to become a chemistry major. That didn't last very long, but—I think I took a German course. I really don't—and, of course, I had to take my naval science courses.

FARKAS: Can you tell me more about what was required for ROTC at that time?

STEFFEN: I'm sorry, could you—

FARKAS: Can you tell me more about what kind of requirements there were for ROTC in terms of—

STEFFEN: Oh, sure.

FARKAS: Yeah.

STEFFEN: Yeah. We were required to take—in addition to the naval science courses, we were required to take physics and calculus and psychology.

FARKAS: Interesting.

STEFFEN: And the rest of it, you know, we could take basically whatever we wanted. There were certain majors that were not accepted, but that wouldn't have been a big issue at Dartmouth. Well, I guess—I guess Dartmouth does have a religion major, but you couldn't major in religion, couldn't major in veterinary sciences or stuff like that, so—

FARKAS: That's very interesting.

Now, when did you first meet the ROTC professor or even come in contact with ROTC? What was that experience like?

STEFFEN: Well, it was fairly soon, and once again, they had, as I recall, probably a beer party or a cocktail party [laughs] to get us indoctrinated. So you met the commanding officer of the unit as well as the instructors that were all—they were all naval officers. But, yeah, they did have a social function to get us acquainted.

FARKAS: So it wasn't—it wasn't really the kind of off-the-bus drill structure—drill instructor kind of greeting? It was a very informal greeting?

STEFFEN: Yeah, it was reasonably informal. I mean, we had to go over and, you know, get our uniforms and stuff like that. Back in those days, we were only required [unintelligible] on Wednesdays, which was the drill day. The rest of the time, we did not wear our uniforms. But there was no, like, any

kind of a, you know, boot camp type atmosphere or anything like that. They did—on our Wednesday drill periods, they had, you know, indoctrinated us in the basics, and we had marching and stuff like that. But it was—it was pretty laid back. The Navy [chuckles] has never been quite so big on some of that stuff as I think maybe some of the other branches of the service are.

FARKAS: So was there an ROTC building or an office, any kind of central depot where they kept stuff, where the officers were?

STEFFEN: Yeah, there was. It's not—I don't think the classrooms were in there. I'm trying to remember. I think a lot of our classrooms were actually over in—somewhere over there in Dartmouth Row, those little white buildings. But—what are the buildings that are opposite the white buildings on the Green? You got to keep in mind, this is more than forty years ago. McNutt?

FARKAS: No ways. Parkhurst [Hall]?

STEFFEN: Yeah, Parkhurst, probably, one of the—

FARKAS: College Hall, Collis [now Collis Center for Student Involvement].

STEFFEN: Yeah, one of those was, like, the—where the ROTC offices were, but not the classrooms. So that's where the—

FARKAS: Now, did you drill—did you drill with rifles and—

STEFFEN: We did. We used—

FARKAS: Did you drill with rifles?

STEFFEN: Yeah, [M]1903 Springfields. Yeah, bolt-action Springfields. Actually, it was good—

FARKAS: Lucky you.

STEFFEN: Yeah, it was a good rifle to drill with because it's very nicely balanced. Never fired them, but we drilled with them.

FARKAS: Heh! And they were—now, this is a very small detail. I don't expect you to remember this, but do you remember if the

rifles had the bolts taken out or if the barrels were filled? I know they do that to a lot of drill rifles, but—

STEFFEN: No, they were fully functional.

FARKAS: Were they somewhat operable rifles?

STEFFEN: Yeah, they were fully functional. That's one reason I preferred drilling with the '03 Springfields because when you went to inspection arms, you had to open the bolt. You didn't have to worry about getting the "M1 thumb" [injury to the thumb when using M1 Garand]. If you were drilling with an M1, if you didn't get your—when you opened up—yeah.

FARKAS: Oh. Yeah.

STEFFEN: So you didn't have to worry about the—I never did get the M1 thumb.

FARKAS: So to explain for—

STEFFEN: Pardon?

FARKAS: [No comment.]

STEFFEN: Go ahead.

FARKAS: I was just going to explain for people who might not know what the M1 thumb is—yeah. It's when the bolt closes on your finger—

STEFFEN: Right.

FARKAS: —when you're trying to—

STEFFEN: That's about all the more I know about it, because I never did drill with an M1.

FARKAS: Do you remember where they kept the rifles?

STEFFEN: Pardon? Where they kept them? No, I—well, I think they had an armor—

FARKAS: Do you know where they kept the rifles?

STEFFEN: Pardon? They had them—I think we—

FARKAS: Do you remember, by any chance, where that was?

STEFFEN: One of the field—we drilled in one of the—that's probably where they kept the rifles, in one of the old field houses. I want to say Leverone [Field House], but I—I don't know if that was it or not. But we did mostly—due to the weather there,—

FARKAS: Yeah, that's where we drill today, actually.

STEFFEN: —we did most of our drill indoors.

I'm sorry. I think we talked over each other there.

FARKAS: Yeah. Oh, that's actually very interesting. I've seen pictures—okay, sorry. I've seen pictures of them drilling on the Green. Did you ever—do you recall drilling on the Green ever?

STEFFEN: No, never. Yeah, as far as I know, it was all indoors. So, yeah, it was in the field house.

FARKAS: Interesting.

So can you walk me through what your typical Wednesday schedule was in terms of ROTC? Did you do any type of daily or—workout of some type with ROTC?

STEFFEN: I don't really remember. Like I said, we did a fair amount of drilling. We might have done some physical type stuff. I do remember taking physical fitness tests once a year or so, but other than that, I don't—I don't really remember a whole lot about it, about the actual drills. Must not have impressed me too much.

FARKAS: What did you learn—what did you learn in Navy science class?

STEFFEN: I'm sorry, could you repeat that?

FARKAS: [Silence.]

STEFFEN: Could you repeat the question, please?

FARKAS: Ah, yes. What did you learn in Navy science class?

STEFFEN: Oh, well,—

FARKAS: Sorry, I think there might be a little bit of a sound problem.

STEFFEN: Yeah. Naval science classes. Some were about—leadership classes. Of course, at the very beginning it was kind of almost like an introduction to the Navy, where you learn the different ranks and naval courtesies and stuff like that. We also had classes in engineering. Learned about the boilers aboard ships. And had class. We had navigation classes. Learned some piloting. And by piloting I don't mean aircraft piloting but naval vessel piloting, as opposed to navigation. Also learned navigation. Naval history.

FARKAS: Did you know by that time you were interested in being an aviator?

STEFFEN: No, I didn't even think about aviation until—we had to take training cruises every summer, and the summer—my second cruise, which was the summer between my sophomore and junior year, was split between three weeks of Marine indoctrination down in [Naval Amphibious Base] Little Creek, Virginia, and, quite frankly, it didn't take me three weeks to know that I didn't want to be a Marine, and three weeks of aviation indoctrination in Corpus Christi, Texas. And that's when the aviation bug hit me, so that's when I decided that I wanted to—wanted to be an aviator.

FARKAS: Now, I'd love to go back to that. Before we do, can you tell me about what your social life was like at Dartmouth? Did you ever go in a fraternity, by any chance?

STEFFEN: No, I didn't. I did rush. Apparently nobody was interested in me, so I was no big deal, so—yeah, I was not in a fraternity. It was a little hard, back in those days, to get dates since there weren't any women on campus, so we would have to road trippie over to some of the girls' colleges that were within driving distance, or down to Boston or whatever. So I didn't date a whole lot until—until my senior year. And then I pretty much had I guess a date almost every weekend, so—that's when I had to start—

FARKAS: Had you had any girlfriends in high school?

STEFFEN: Yeah, I did. I didn't have a girlfriend in high school, but I did end up with a hometown girl after my—when I went back in the summer break and actually had her come up for Winter Carnival my senior year, so—

FARKAS: So your social life at Dartmouth, you're saying, didn't really involve the fraternities all that much. Where *did* you go to hang out?

STEFFEN: Well, no, I mean, I used to—I would go to the fraternities, you know, for parties and that, but I did not belong to one, so—you know, unless it was a big weekend—

FARKAS: Do you remember—

STEFFEN: —the fraternities would have—

FARKAS: —your favorite fraternities to go to?

STEFFEN: No, I sure don't. I think whichever one the band sounded best as I was walking by or something. I really don't—really don't recall.

FARKAS: So sorry. The audio seems to have a slight delay, but—so I apologize that my questions are getting to you a little bit late. But can you tell me more about the big weekends, about those different festivals, what you remember about those?

STEFFEN: I don't remember a whole lot. I just remember that there were, you know, big weekends. Winter Carnival—if you didn't have a date, Winter Carnival [chuckles] wasn't all that fun. But the Green Key [Weekend] and Dartmouth Night—because the weather was better [chuckles], they were a little bit more—more enjoyable. But I did—by my junior and senior year, I was able to—able to get dates for some of the—some of those weekends. Like I said, pickings were kind of limited back in those—those days.

I remember the college used to have what they called mixers, where they would actually bus—

FARKAS: Can you tell me about—

STEFFEN: No, I was going to say the college used to have mixers, where they would actually bus girls in from the colleges.

FARKAS: Can you tell me about which colleges you went to? Any particular that you remember?

STEFFEN: Yeah. I don't know if they're even still in exis- —there was Colby Junior College [no Colby-Sawyer College] over in—I think that was over in New London, New Hampshire. Green Mountain Junior College [now Green Mountain College] over in Vermont. And, of course, if you wanted to step up in class, you'd go down to Smith [College] or Vassar [College] or Wellesley [College] or Mount Holyoke [College].

Usually if somebody didn't fix you—

FARKAS: So here's an interesting—

STEFFEN: Go ahead.

FARKAS: [Silence.]

STEFFEN: Go ahead with the question.

FARKAS: Sorry about this audio delay. It makes all my questions get to you after—when you're already answering.

Did being a Navy ROTC cadet ever give you a social advantage when it came to impressing women at these other colleges?

STEFFEN: No, it definitely didn't give an advantage. I don't know that it—that it hindered it, either. I remember my freshman year there, they took us on a—the NROTC unit took us on a field trip down to—down to Boston to go out on some sea trials on the USS *Albany*, a guided missile cruiser. And we went out on the town the night before, and we had to—we had to wear our uniforms, as I recall, and trying to pick up the Radcliffe [College, now Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University] girls in our uniforms. But back in those days, the military was still reasonably popular, so it wasn't—it wasn't too bad a deal. But certainly by the time I graduated, if you wanted to impress a girl, you did not tell her you were in ROTC, that's for sure.

FARKAS: So obviously—you previously mentioned that when—at the time you came into Dartmouth, Vietnam was not widely known, and you just said that the military still enjoyed at least some level of popularity. Can you tell me about the

evolution of students' sentiments toward the military—you know, when you first heard the word "Vietnam" being used?

STEFFEN: Well, I don't remember exactly the first time I heard the term "Vietnam" being used, but to put things in perspective, the Gulf of Tonkin incident was in 1964, so that was approximately halfway through my stay at Dartmouth. And, of course, as the U.S. ramped up their involvement in Vietnam and increased the draft, that's I think when the sediment—sentiment started turning.

To be quite honest with you, looking back on it—well, not just even looking back on it, but I was aware of it at the time—I think most of the protests against the war weren't based on philosophical differences, although I'm sure there were some of that, as it was that people just didn't want to get drafted and go over there and get shot at. I think if there hadn't have been a draft, I think it would have been an all-volunteer force back in those days, I don't think you would have had anywhere near the protests against the war as you did back then.

So I think it was basically guys not wanting to go over and get shot at, especially going over— and that's probably understandable for somebody in college. Probably didn't want to go over as an enlisted person and, God forbid, hang out with the "great unwashed," high school dropouts and all that. So they didn't want to go. They figured they had better things to do. So I think that's where a lot of the—

FARKAS: So can you—

STEFFEN: Go ahead.

FARKAS: Can you tell me about—yeah. Can you tell me about what it was like walking around campus wearing a Navy ROTC uniform? Did people ever jeer at you at all?

WOMAN: Bob come in?

STEFFEN: Yeah, I think he's left.

That was my wife just came home from work. Hold on just a—can you pause it there?

[Recording interruption.]

FARKAS: This is Sandor Farkas interviewing Nicholas Steffen. I am in—I'm in Webster Hall on Dartmouth College's campus. He is at his home in Henderson, Nevada. It is Wednesday, August 26th, 2015. And this is the second part of our oral history interview.

All right, so you had said that you were in the Dartmouth College radio station. Can you just remind me a bit about—about that?

STEFFEN: Yeah. I worked there as an announcer and a disk jockey. I wasn't on in prime time. Usually the early morning hours [chuckles], like 6 or so, 6 a.m. on Saturday morning or something like that. But, yeah, I enjoyed my time working there.

FARKAS: And did you ever cover news?

STEFFEN: Just read it off the wire. We'd get the news copy off the teletype. That's what they used in those days. It basically—as they used to say, rip it and read it, just pull off the printed stuff that came over the teletype and read it on the hour.

FARKAS: And do you recall ever reading any news about Vietnam or Southeast Asia?

STEFFEN: I don't. I may have, but I don't recall doing that. And I also don't recall being on the air that often. I was on a few times but just a few occasions, so I don't recall reading anything about Vietnam at the time.

FARKAS: So previously you had mentioned that you did ROTC, Naval ROTC training sessions during the summer, called cruises?

STEFFEN: Yes.

FARKAS: Can you tell me about especially that last cruise before your senior year and what happened then?

STEFFEN: The last cruise was on a [Allen M.] Sumner-class destroyer out of the naval base at Newport, Rhode Island. The destroyer was used for research and development. The time I was on there, they were testing I think a new fire control

system for the 5-inch .38 caliber guns. We were—that being our first class cruise, we were treated as junior officers. We wore officer-style uniforms and ate the meals in the officers' wardroom—

FARKAS: And your—.

STEFFEN: —aboard ship.

FARKAS: And your first class—that would mean your senior cruise.

STEFFEN: That's correct.

FARKAS: Yes. So you're saying you ate in the officers'—

STEFFEN: In the wardroom aboard the ship, with the officers, yes. And stood junior officers type watches on the bridge of the ship and stuff like that.

FARKAS: And can you tell me about returning from the cruise to the home port of that ship?

STEFFEN: As I recall, we were probably back in port every night because, like I said, it was probably a research and development ship, so they would go out and test equipment and then come back in in the evening. So as far as getting to exotic ports of call, that didn't happen. [Chuckles.] We didn't go anywhere else other than Newport, Rhode Island, so—

FARKAS: Had you gotten to go anywhere interesting on previous cruises?

STEFFEN: Well, we did. On my third class cruise, which was—the destroyer there was based out of Norfolk, Virginia. We were sent up to the destroyer squadron along with the aircraft carrier, [USS] *Intrepid*. Sent up to Boston, and our destroyer was detailed actually to pull into the port of Salem, Massachusetts, because the destroyer, USS *John W. Weeks*, was named after—I believe it was the secretary of war or something, who was originally from Salem, Massachusetts. And our post visit coincided with a town celebration they were having anyway, so we pulled into—into port.

The harbor had long since silted in, so we weren't able to actually tie up at the pier; we had to anchor out and take

Liberty boats [sic; ships] into shore. But they had a big civic celebration and a parade, and we marched in the parade and all that. And then after we left, unfortunately, the destroyer, when we were leaving port actually ran aground and bent one of the prop shafts on there, waited up in dry dock for repairs in Boston. And they decided that we weren't getting a whole lot of training on being in dry dock, so they flew us up to really join the destroyer squadron which had proceeded up to Canada, so we rejoined them. We actually joined them in Quebec City, Canada. So we got a chance to see Quebec City. And when we left there, we came down the Saint Lawrence River and then back—back to Norfolk. So that was—that was the first time I had ever been out of the United States, so that was kind of interesting for me.

FARKAS: And, again, remind me how many of you there were, as in how many Naval ROTC cadets there were. Approximately.

STEFFEN: I want to say—I want to say that approximately there was—I'm guessing probably 20 to 25 all together aboard—aboard the ship.

FARKAS: And did the number of Dartmouth Naval ROTC cadets increase or decrease as your time went on?

STEFFEN: It stayed pretty constant, as I recall. I don't think we had too many—too many dropouts. Most of the—as I recall, most of the NROTC students were on scholarship. Some of them were not, but most of us I think were on scholarship, so that was a strong incentive to stay with the program.

FARKAS: And did you get the sense that people were coming there because they were specifically interested in a military career, or was it for other reasons, such as financial reasons?

STEFFEN: I think it was probably a combination of both, but primarily that they were interested in a naval career, and since we would have had to have committed to the program back in high school—we're talking probably, you know, 1961 to actually file the applications for it and start taking the entrance exams and all that. This is long before Vietnam, you know, was—was an issue. Let me put it that way. It would have been a good three years before the Gulf of Tonkin incident. So people weren't doing it as a way to avoid the draft or avoid serving in the Army as an enlisted soldier. So I think people were genuinely interested in going into the

Navy, perhaps not necessarily making it a career. Certainly the financial aspects were significant.

In my case, there's no way that my parents could have afforded to send me to Dartmouth without—without a scholarship, and the Navy scholarship was full tuition, books, laboratory fees, and we got paid a small—I believe it was $50 allowance, which back in the '60s was actually a fair amount of money. So basically the only thing my parents had to pay was room and board. So, yeah—so there was a financial thing for some people. Other people genuinely wanted to spend time in the Navy or if not a full naval career.

FARKAS: Interesting.

So can you tell me if the image of ROTC changed at all throughout your time at Dartmouth, if the way you got treated when you were wearing your uniform changed.

STEFFEN: It changed gradually. Not a significant change. I think there was always probably some people that maybe looked down a little bit on the people in NROTC or RO- —any of the ROTCs as perhaps not being able to afford college on their own and therefore weren't quite as good as some of the Eastern elite. But that wasn't a significant issue. Generally, most people just accepted it.

By the time I graduated in 1966, of course, Vietnam was—was becoming an issue, and there were some people that were not in favor of the war and therefore not in favor of the military and thus not in favor of ROTC, et cetera, et cetera. So there was a little bit of an issue toward the end of my stay at Dartmouth, but I don't recall it being a major issue. Pretty much mostly a live and let live, I think.

FARKAS: You never had much contact with that latter group, the people who—

STEFFEN: No, it wasn't—I mean, there were people that maybe had some protest signs or something like that, but I don't—I don't recall anything of any significance going on. There might have been a little bit more on some of the other Ivy [League] campuses, but '66—and, of course, I graduated—I forget the exact day, you know, where you got commissioned. But it was the end of May or beginning of June. It was still relatively early in '66, so I don't think the protest movement

had really picked up a lot of steam like it had by ’67 or ’68. I remember hearing about some of the campus protests at Columbia [University] and all that in ’68 and that, but nothing like that was going on when I was at Dartmouth.

FARKAS: Now, can you tell me a bit about your academics? I recall that we previously talked about your majors. Can you remind me of how you changed majors, if those classes helped you in the service?

STEFFEN: Yeah. I started off initially as a geology major and after a couple of courses in that decided that wasn’t really what I wanted, so I switched over to the geography department, and the department head was able to give me a modified major to physical geography so I was able to use my geology credits towards my geography major. But as I recall, I did take some courses in meteorology and oceanography, which did play a part in helping me in my career in the Navy, so—

FARKAS: Now, when you were deciding what you wanted to go into in the Navy, with the branching process, can you tell me about what you wanted to do, how you applied to do that, and what you ended up getting?

STEFFEN: Well, initially I was thinking that I probably wanted to go into submarines, but I had based that on my knowledge of World War II submarines and that, and, of course, the Navy was switching over to nuclear powered submarines. Admiral [Hyman G.] Rickover was in charge of the program then, and it was going to require a lot more expertise in physics than I had. I’d be going to nuclear power school and all that. And I started losing interest in doing that.

And in about the same time, on my second class cruise, which would have been the cruise between my sophomore and junior year, we were given three weeks of aviation indoctrination down at Corpus Christi, Texas, and got a chance to go up on some flights in different types of aircraft and actually take the controls of the airplanes and get some flying. And I really enjoyed it. It just seemed like that was what I was interested in, so I applied for—put in the paperwork to go into the flight program and was accepted for that.

So after completing an aviation physical down at the Reserve Naval Air Station down in South Weymouth, Massachusetts, near Boston, I was accepted for flight training and went down to Pensacola [Florida] upon commissioning.

FARKAS: Now, can you tell me about commissioning and graduation, what that was like?

STEFFEN: We had our commissioning ceremony first. I believe it was a day prior to the graduation ceremony, and all of the ROTC units were there. Of course, most people had their parents there, and we were all in our dress uniforms and were commissioned as—

FARKAS: Where was—

STEFFEN: Go ahead.

FARKAS: Where was this taking place?

STEFFEN: I believe it was at the Bema [Big Empty Meeting Area].

FARKAS: Ah.

STEFFEN: It was outdoors, and I think it was at the Bema. And so people were either getting commissioned as second lieutenants in the Marines, Army or Air Force, or ensigns in the Navy. And then I believe the following day was the college graduation, which was held on the lawn in front of Baker Library [not Baker-Berry Library].

FARKAS: Did you wear your uniform?

STEFFEN: I have no—no, no, just a cap and gown thing. I have absolutely no recollection whatsoever [chuckles] who the speaker was, so it couldn't have been anybody who made much of an impression on me.

FARKAS: So can you tell me where you went after graduation?

STEFFEN: I took a couple—I went back home to Minnesota and had just literally just a few days of leave before I had to report down in Pensacola. I actually didn’t start flight training immediately. I was sent on a temporary duty basis to the USS *Lexington*, which was an aircraft carrier based out in

Pensacola at the time. It was used for training and qualifying the student naval aviators. So I was part of ship's company for about three months down in Pensacola while we were waiting to start the flight program. I was assigned the job as the assistant B Division officer, which was in charge of the boilers. When I wasn't in an office doing paperwork, I was down in the boiler rooms, which was really hot, so I tried to spend as little time as possible [chuckles] down in the boiler rooms.

My immediate superior was a lieutenant junior grade, a fairly junior officer, himself. And he knew that I was only on the ship for about three months and was going to be starting a flight program and knew that my heart wasn't in shipboard life, so he gave me permission to go up most of the time and watch the carrier qualifications up on the—up in the flight deck, so that's what I did a lot of the time.

FARKAS: Did any other Dartmouth students go into aviation?

STEFFEN: Yes, they did. I'm trying to—I think there were probably about four or five of us that I recall went into the flight program. In fact, my roommate aboard ship was another Dartmouth Class of '66, so he and I went through flight training together.

FARKAS: Do you remember his name?

STEFFEN: I do. Kirk [J.] Ditzler. He passed away several years ago. I don't know what the cause was.

FARKAS: Ah. Do you remember the names of any of the other four [unintelligible]?

STEFFEN: I do. There was [Peter B.] "Pete" Richardson [Class of 1966]. Went through flight training the same time I did. As a matter of fact, we ended up in the same squadron, and he and I were roommates when we were stationed at Patuxent River in Maryland. And then our time in Vietnam overlapped a little bit, but we were over in Vietnam together. But we did not fly together because we were both copilots, so we didn't fly with each other.

Another person that went through the flight training was [William B.] "Bill" Hayden, who I believe retired as an admiral. I may be mistaken on that. He went through flight

training sometime after I did because he—upon graduation, he immediately went on to engineering at Thayer [School of Engineering], so he was delayed about a year before he started flight training.

And then another Dartmouth student that went through flight training was Evan [K.] "Pat" Woodworth [Class of 1966], who was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Marines and had to go to [Marine Corps Base] Quantico prior to starting flight training, so once again, he was behind me in flight training, so—

I found out much later, about four or five years ago, at a high school reunion, that apparently he and I were over in Da Nang, Vietnam, together at the same time, but neither one of us knew that the other was there, so—like two ships passing in the night, I guess.

FARKAS: Did you say high school reunion?

STEFFEN: Yes. He and I—he was from my hometown, and I've known him since literally nursery school. We were sandbox playmates. His parents, my parents were very good friends of each other, and they only lived about—less than a couple hundred yards from our house, so we used to play in—literally play in the sandbox together when we were infants. Went all through elementary and junior high, high school, Dartmouth together, so—

FARKAS: Interesting.

Now, can you tell me about the flight training process, about your thoughts going through that process in regards to where you were possibly going?

STEFFEN: Yes. When I actually started my training after my three months aboard the *Lexington*, we started—as I recall, it was about six weeks of ground school in Pensacola. And upon completing the ground school, we were sent to an auxiliary air station that was in the Pensacola area, [Naval Air Station] Saufley Field, where we were flying the Beechcraft T-34 [Mentor] aircraft, a single-engine, propeller aircraft. It was there that we learned the basic flying and soloed after approximately ten hours.

We were also introduced into basic aerobatics, and after approximately 30 hours or flying time, which I think took about three or four months to accomplish, we were transferred out to another auxiliary air station in the Pensacola area, [Naval Air Station] Whiting Field, flying the [North American Aviation] T-28 [Trojan] aircraft, which was a—much higher performance, still propeller aircraft, probably comparable to a World War II fighter as far as performance goes.

And there, we learned formation flying and more aerobatics, instrument flying, night flying, and that probably took another—as I recall, another four or five months, at which time we were transferred back to Saufley Field to fly the T-28, still fly the T-28 but go through aircraft—or carrier landing practice. Practiced landing on land. They had an outline of an aircraft carrier marked out the runway, and we practiced landing on that. And after we were deemed ready, we were sent out to—out to the ship to make our—do our carrier landings.

FARKAS: So throughout this process, when did you realize that you were going to be going to Vietnam?

STEFFEN: I didn't know for sure I was going to be going to Vietnam. It was about the time I was going through the aircraft—or the carrier qualifications. We had to fill out what they called a dream sheet, where we would request what type aircraft we wanted to fly. I decided I wasn't particularly interested in flying jets off of aircraft carriers, partly due to my experience of three months aboard the *Lexington*. It was not air conditioned, so I thought, *Well, I don't really know if I really want to do this anymore.* And I had no burning desire to go to Vietnam at the time, and I knew that if I had gone into fighters or attack, flying jets, that I'd be going onto a carrier, for sure, and then fly in Vietnam.

So I put in for multi-engine aircraft training, which was conducted at Corpus Christi, Texas. That was in the Grumman S-2 [Tracker] aircraft. And that took about—I think about another four or five months of multi-engine training, with a lot of emphasis on instrument flying.

FARKAS: Sorry, what instrument f—?

STEFFEN: Somewhere along in that—pardon?

FARKAS: What is instrument flying?

STEFFEN: Yeah, the instruments in flying. So you rely on the instruments as opposed to visual flying. In other words, if you were flying in bad weather, where the visibility was not sufficient to allow you to get a good visual horizon, you'd rely on the various instruments in the aircraft for your—conduct your flights.

FARKAS: I see. So—sorry, you were saying—you were telling me about when you realized that you were going to Vietnam?

STEFFEN: I requested assignment to a squadron—either first or second choice. VX-8, based out of Patuxent River, Maryland. And I got orders there, and I found out that they—in addition to doing oceanographic research, they also had a detachment over in Vietnam, so I figured it was probably likely that I would be going to Vietnam. So it was I guess sometime near the completion of my flight training, I realized that there was probably a pretty good chance that I'd be going to—going to Vietnam, but not in a combat—not flying combat missions.

FARKAS: So you'd been assigned to the squadron VX- —what was it, VXN-8?

STEFFEN: Yes. Well, they actually changed their name. They added the "N" partly through the time I was there. It went from VX-8 to VXN-8. I'm not sure why they changed the designation, but—

FARKAS: What do those letters mean?

STEFFEN: Well, V in the Navy squadron, V stands for fixed wing aircraft. X is, for lack of a better term, is a research or experimental squadron. And the N designation was a sub-designation, a modifier, if you were, as you will, for the X, meaning oceanographic. So basically it means an oceanographic research squadron.

FARKAS: Interesting.

So can you tell me about the time in between when you were assigned to VX-8 and when you got on a plane to go to Vietnam?

STEFFEN: Yeah. I got to VX-8 in April, as I recall, of 1968. And so for the rest of the time there, I was going through training to learn to fly the Lockheed [L-1049] Super Constellation, which is the type aircraft they were flying. So went through training there. Flew on some of their local missions. They had some oceanographic research missions based out of Patuxent River.

And then a few months later, in February of 1969, I was sent over to our detachment over in Saigon. So as I recall, and this is a long time ago—as I recall, I flew out commercial out of Baltimore, Maryland, to the West Coast, and then I got on a military airlift command charter flight that went from the West Coast—we hit Hawaii and the Philippines and on into—on into Tan Son Nhut Air Base at Saigon, Vietnam.

FARKAS: So did you get a chance before you left to go back to your hometown or to meet with your parents or family?

STEFFEN: I did. We had some leave, and I went home and visited my—my folks.

FARKAS: And were you worried about—about going to Vietnam?

STEFFEN: No, I wasn't. Like I said, we weren't going to be flying direct combat missions, although it was in a war zone. The billeting hotel that we stayed in was run by the Army, but it was in downtown Saigon—was fairly close to the presidential palace, the Vietnamese presidential palace. And that—the palace came under periodic rocket attacks, so we could hear the rockets hitting in the morning occasionally or so. We were certainly aware that there was a war going on, but it wasn't nearly as dangerous as flying a fighter attack aircraft off of the carriers.

FARKAS: So can you tell me about landing in—you said Tan Son Nhut in Vietnam? What it was like getting off the plane, what the climate was like?

STEFFEN: Yeah. When I first stepped off, the first thing I noticed was how hot and humid it was, and I still remember it. It's kind of hard to describe, but there was a distinct aroma to the air, kind of a—almost an odor of decay or something like that. It wasn't necessarily unpleasant, but it was certainly different from anything I'd experienced before. I definitely was aware that I was, you know, in a foreign country.

And just to see all the different people was a real eye opener. But I loved it almost from the minute I got off the airplane. It was kind of like, *Wow! Boy, am I glad I'm here! This is really interesting!*

FARKAS: So what did you do that first day? As soon as you got off the plane, where did you go and how were you briefed, or when were you briefed?

STEFFEN: One of my squadron mates, who had been over there for a while, met me and kind of showed me around. I think one of the first things he did was give me a cold beer. Of course, we were going through a pretty significant jet lag. I think the time zone difference between Saigon and the East Coast is probably almost 12 hours, so I was completely on the back side of my normal clock, so it took a few days to get used to that.

But he escorted me around to the various places. I had to sign in, and I had to draw flight gear there. We were issued a pistol and ammunition. As officers, we were required to carry side-arms at all times over there, and issued our jungle fatigues, because we could not—

FARKAS: What kind of pistol?

STEFFEN: We had a choice, actually. The choice was between the 1911 Colt .45 [known in the Vietnam era as the Pistol, Colt. 45, Automatic, M1011A1],automatic, semi-automatic pistol, or a .38 caliber revolver. I chose the revolver because it was—I didn't figure I was probably going to be shooting it anyway, and the .38 weighed less than the .45, so I figured, *Since hopefully I won't need to use it anyway, I might as well carry something that's more comfortable to carry*, so I chose the .38 revolver. [Chuckles.] And I was right. Never had to use it. Never came close to using it. It was probably rusted when I turned it back in.

FARKAS: So then you were telling me about drawing fatigues?

STEFFEN: Pardon?

FARKAS: You were telling about drawing fatigues?

STEFFEN: I still didn't catch what you said there, Sandor.

FARKAS: Oh, sorry. You were telling me about drawing your fatigues?

STEFFEN: Oh, drawing the fatigues. Okay.

FARKAS: Yes.

STEFFEN: Yeah, we wore uniforms—they were kind of a green—basically it's like the Navy Seabees wore, as opposed to—normally, at a Stateside naval base, you would be wearing—officers would be wearing a khaki uniform. Over there, we wore just green utilities. They were easier to—easier to wash, had our rank and insignia just embroidered on so we didn't have to worry about losing the—losing the insignia. And they weren't as shiny. They were just black rank and insignia, so they didn't stand out like a shiny lieutenant's bars.

FARKAS: And you were a lieutenant at that point, as opposed to a second lieutenant or the Navy equivalent. I'm sorry, I forget Navy rank.

STEFFEN: The first time I was over in Vietnam—because I went earlier, twice—I was a lieutenant junior grade up until—I got over there in February of '69 and then actually the 1st of July 1969 I got promoted to full lieutenant, which would be the equivalent of an Army captain, so—

Promotions were coming fairly fast back in those days, because I'd only been commissioned for three years and was an O-3, so I was up at Da Nang. We had a sub-detachment up in Da Nang. The major detachment was in Tan Son Nhut in Saigon.

But the normal rotation for pilots would have been for a six-month tour over there, was two months in Ton Son Nhut, two months up at Da Nang, two months back in Ton Son Nhut, and then rotate back to the States for about a year and then back to Vietnam and do it all over again.

FARKAS: So can you tell me briefly what the timeline of that first tour was: when you got there, when you went to Tan Son Nhut or to Da Nang and then when you got back? Just the first tour.

STEFFEN: Yeah. I got there toward the end of February of 1969, and I guess I spent a couple months flying out of—out of Tan Son

Nhut, flying the Super Constellations. We were broadcasting airborne television. Our mission—we'd take off normally around five or so in the afternoon, fly partway up the coast of South Vietnam and orbit off shore at 10,000 feet for three or four hours, broadcasting videotapes, Vietnamese language videotapes for—we had television transmitters on board, and then after about three or four hours of that we'd fly back down the coast and land, usually around midnight, one in the morning, back at Tan Son Nhut.

I believe it was in May so that I went up to Da Nang, and that was a much—we only had one aircraft up there, just four officers and a small cadre of enlisted personnel up there, and we were broadcasting a clandestine radio—a highly-classified radio mission out of Da Nang, that we'd take off in the evening and fly up off the coast. We'd fly off the coast of North Vietnam for that. And I was there until August.

And then came back down to Tan Son Nhut, flew a couple of months down there, as I recall, and I think returned back to the States in I think about September. I don't recall exactly. Back to Patuxent River.

FARKAS: So in Tan—

STEFFEN: Go ahead.

FARKAS: At Tan Son Nhut were you broadcasting the Vietnamese language television to the South or to the North?

STEFFEN: To the South. It was mostly public service type of stuff, like hygiene, but some cultural stuff: Chinese opera type stuff. I only watched a little bit of it. I was up in the cockpit, flying, most of the time, but I did—when I would take a little break from the cockpit I'd come back and watch a little bit of what was being broadcast, but since it was in Vietnamese, I really didn't understand a whole lot of what was going on, but I could—I could tell enough that some of it was on hygiene, or they had Chinese opera. I mean, it was in the Vietnamese language, but it was referred to as Chinese opera type stuff.

FARKAS: And what type of plane were you flying, and can you tell me exactly what your role was as a pilot?

STEFFEN: Yeah. The plane we flew was a Lockheed [L-1049] Super Constellation, a four-engine, propeller aircraft, reciprocating

engines. That type aircraft had been used an airliner most famously by TWA [Trans World Airlines] but by a lot of the major airlines in the United States to carry passengers.

But the Navy versions were configured, in this case, to broadcast television. We had TV transmitters on board, and we had the capability of broadcasting either videotape, which is what we normally did. We could also relay a signal from the ground and then relay it from the airplane, but I don't recall that we actually ever did that.

And we could also do live broadcasts from the aircraft, itself. It had a very small studio on board, just enough for a couple of—a couple of seats and a camera that was remotely operated, because there wasn't enough room to get a cameraman in the studio as well, so they could conduct an interview, live interview from that little studio on board the aircraft. But, once again, I don't recall, while I was over there, that that was ever done.

Primarily we would receive the videotapes sometime I guess in the afternoon, and the technicians would pick those up from the—I believe it was JUSMAG, Joint U.S. Military Assistance Group over there—pick up the videotapes that they wanted broadcast, and that's what we broadcast in the evening.

FARKAS: I'm kind of confused. Were you the pilot or were you the copilot? I actually really don't know the difference between those two things, in the first place, so can you explain that?

STEFFEN: Oh, okay. All right. I was—the first—my first tour of duty over there, I was a copilot. We shared flying responsibilities. I made takeoffs and landings, but I was—I was not in command of the aircraft, is I guess the difference. We had an aircraft commander on board. He was responsible for the conduct of the flight, the safety of the flight and basically was the officer in charge of the crew.

We had approximately—I think we probably had a crew of about—I'm trying to remember here—the technicians and the flight engineers, et cetera. I think we probably had a crew of 10 to 12 people on board.

But my job as a copilot was to sit up in the cockpit next to the—next to the pilot and—but I would normally get every

other takeoff or landing. I would fly the aircraft when the aircraft commander needed a—needed a break. So that's basically what a copilot does. Really no different than the copilot on a commercial airliner, just not in charge of—basically does the same thing that the aircraft commander does except without the authority or responsibility.

FARKAS: Now, changing gears a little bit, can you tell me about the building you lived in: where that was, what it was like inside, what the living conditions were like, and the food?

STEFFEN: I'm sorry, what the—could you repeat that, Sandor?

FARKAS: Can you tell me what the building you lived in was like: where it was, how your—kind of what the arrangements were?

STEFFEN: Oh, sure. Yeah, the building we lived in was—I think it was originally—been a hotel, but I'm not positive on that. It about a eight-story building in downtown Saigon, just only a couple of blocks from the presidential palace. It was run as an officer billeting hotel, by the Army, and it was primarily used as a transient officer facility for people that were kind of coming and going, although our unit was over there more or less permanently.

It was also, interesting enough, used—a lot of the USO [United Service Organizations] entertainers that came over to entertain the troops would be put up at that—at that particular place. So I remember one time Miss America was over there, under heavy armed guard, I might add. So I didn't get a chance—didn't get a chance to meet her. They had MPs [military policemen] stationed outside her room at all times [chuckles], so—but, yeah, occasionally you'd see some Hollywood celebrity or something over there, but not too often. I think we were kind of on different schedules than they were.

One kind of interesting note, because it was primarily a transient billeting facility, but our unit was there more or less permanently, we were—they made us part of the hotel defense force in case we came under attack, so we were all issued M16 [rifles] and grenades, which we kept in our—in our lockers. I never quite got over that we had shelves in our lockers, and there, along with the bottles of booze and cans of sardines, were a half dozen or so grenades. [Laughs.] It

seemed like kind of an unsecure way to keep them, but that's the way things were over there.

FARKAS: How proficient were you with an M16 and a grenade? Did you ever learn how to use those?

STEFFEN: Nope, never got any training on it at all, which also struck me as a little strange. It was kind of a—kind of a screwed-up situation. We used to joke it may have been a messed-up war, but it was the only one we had.

But, yeah, no, when we were over there, there was some concern in February of 1969 that there was a going to be a repeat of the Tet Offensive of '68, so the plan was to evacuate our aircraft to a different base, Cam Ranh Bay. I didn't evacuate. We stayed—I stayed there, but some of the people flew—some of the other people flew the aircraft away.

But because some of our people were going to be gone, we had to go down and tell the master sergeant that was in charge of the hotel that we wouldn't be able to provide the defense force for the hotel, and he said that that was the best news [chuckles] he'd heard in a long time [chuckles], that he wasn't going to have to rely on the Navy for the defense of his hotel, so—

But, yeah, we received—I received no training—I had received training in the .38 or a .45 [caliber handgun] and other rifles, but not—never received any training at all, never fired the M16. Certainly didn't receive any training in grenades. Anything I'd ever seen about grenades I learned about from watching John Wayne World War II movies, so—no, it's probably a very good thing that we never had to use them because probably would have done more damage to ourselves than to the enemy.

FARKAS: So were you each given your own room? Did you have to have a roommate? What kind of living situation was it?

STEFFEN: It depended on your rank. When I was over there the first time, I was of insufficient rank to get my own room, so I guess I had—had a roommate, who was another copilot but, because, as I've mentioned earlier, copilots don't fly together; copilots only fly with aircraft commanders, he and I were—I believe we had—there were two—as I recall, two

copilots there and three aircraft commanders, so the copilots pretty much alternated flying, because the mission flew every night, so one of us would fly one night and then be off the next night, and so one of us was always flying, so we were rarely on the ground together, so—

FARKAS: Did you get along well? I mean, for the times that you were together?

STEFFEN: Oh, yeah.

FARKAS: Yeah?

STEFFEN: Sure, absolutely. Good time. And occasionally we would get some time off together, and we got a chance to go to one of the—one of the clubs, either a local Vietnamese bar or one of the military officer clubs in Saigon, so—

FARKAS: So before we get into the clubs, which I'm very interested to hear about, you flew every other day, you're saying? Can you tell me about the days when you did fly: when you woke up, where you went and got breakfast, did you eat at the hotel, when you arrived for your briefing at Tan Son Nhut?

STEFFEN: Yeah. We would—on the days that we were flying, we would normally go into work right after lunchtime, and the hotel was some distance away from the air base, so there was a Vietnamese driver that would pick us up and take us out to the air base in a Navy sedan. He worked for the detachment. I still remember his name, Mr. Lee. And would drive us out there.

And then we would spend the rest of the afternoon doing paperwork. We didn't have a great deal of paperwork to do, fortunately, but did have a desk and—when I was over the first time, we were literally operating out of a tent. It had a wooden floor but a canvas tent right out there by the flight line. It was air conditioned. Never been in an air conditioned tent before, but anyway, somebody had scrounged some air conditioners and rigged up a way to air condition the tent. But we had desks in there and file cabinets and typewriters and stuff like that.

And then usually around I think about 3:30, four o'clock or so, we'd go—we'd go eat dinner, such as it was, at the—usually at the officers club at Tan Son Nhut and then come

back and preflight the aircraft and get ready for about a—usually about five o'clock or 17:00 departure or a takeoff to fly to the mission.

Normally would come back around one in the morning. It was—there was a 10 o'clock curfew, as I recall, so—our Vietnamese driver was off for the day, so we would have—the enlisted flight crew would drive us in a—I think it was an international carry-all but basically something like a [Chevrolet] Suburban, painted gray, of course. Would drive the officers, the flight crew to our hotel in downtown Saigon.

Get back to the hotel usually around 1:30 or so in the morning. Usually unwind with a couple of—a couple of cold beers and go to bed, and then, because we were flying the night before, we didn't have to go to work till—till noon. So basically we didn't go into work until noon because we were either going to be flying that night or had been flying the previous night, so that was pretty a much typical, you know, routine for the copilots. And the copilots were typically lieutenant junior grades, O-2s.

FARKAS: So what kind of food did you have, and how was it, and what kind of beer did you have?

STEFFEN: Well, interesting you should ask. [Chuckles.] The food—we didn't eat in—the officers didn't eat in a mess hall. When we were on base, we would normally go to the officers club. When we were back in the evening, we would usually walk down to one of the officers clubs in downtown Saigon, usually to a place called the Rex Hotel. Had an officers club there.

But they had a very limited menu. As I recall, about the only items that they had on the menu were they had steak, which wasn't particularly good; hamburgers, which, once again, weren't particularly good; and I don't know what in the world they made their buns out of, but their buns were horrible. Or you could get fried chicken. And that was basically it. I got so tired of eating hamburgers and fried chicken that I almost couldn't—couldn't stand it.

And I never—I never in my life thought I'd say this [chuckles], but I got craving vegetables so bad because the only thing that they—the only side dishes you could get with this thing were French fries. God, it's a wonder we didn't all

die of heart disease over there! I mean, the food was edible. I mean, most people like hamburgers and steak; it just wasn't real—they just weren't real high-quality hamburgers or steak. I don't recall getting fish very—having the opportunity to get fish or, like, I said, vegetables. Occasionally you'd get a salad. And that was pretty much it.

Of course, we used to keep snacks in our rooms. Crackers and sardines were common, or Vienna sausages seemed to be quite popular in those—in those days, or peanut butter and crackers. Certainly not a very healthy diet, but—but I didn't see anybody starving to death, either, so—

FARKAS: Did you ever eat Vietnamese food?

STEFFEN: We did. Occasionally we would go out and eat in—in some of the nicer restaurants. We were forbidden from eating from the street vendors. They were worried about the health concerns of holding— from their—but occasionally we'd go—there were some real good French restaurants there because, you know, Vietnam used to be a French colony. So you would go there occasionally. Some of the best French onion soup and French bread I've ever had anywhere was actually in Saigon. There was a Chinese restaurant that we used to go to occasionally. But not to much just straight Vietnamese food, so—

FARKAS: Oh, sorry. I had also asked what type of beer did you have? did you have Vietnamese beer or—

STEFFEN: Yeah, the Vietnamese beer was horrible. It was Beer 33, or Ba Muoi Ba in the Vietnamese language. Supposedly it was introduced to the Vietnamese by the French. As far as I—I was coming—especially coming from Dartmouth, I was a fairly prodigious beer drinker, but that stuff, as far as I was concerned, was almost undrinkable.

The American beer wasn't a whole lot better. We could get Budweiser or Schlitz or, you know, most of the American brands that were available at the time. They certainly didn't have the wide variety of beers that there are now. But they would send the beer over there, and you could buy it at the exchange or at the—we had a small little—like a mini-exchange on the first floor of our hotel, where you could buy beer or liquor. So the beer wasn't all that great either, because it had—quite often it would be stored outdoors on

pallets in the hot sun, and it spoiled—the rumor was—I don't know if there was any validity to or not, but that it had formaldehyde in it to stabilize it. I don't know if there was any truth to that or not, but it certainly didn't taste very good.

Occasionally we would have to fly our aircraft to the Philippines to have maintenance done on the aircraft, and whenever we did that, we would bring back cases of Philippine San Miguel beer, and that was—that was a whole lot better, so whenever you could get your hands on some San Miguel, you were living the high life.

FARKAS: So how many nights per week, approximately, did you—did you go out to the clubs, kind of have fun? You know, aside from dinner but really, you know, go out and—I don't want to say "party," but—or possibly party. [Chuckles.]

STEFFEN: Yeah. Well, pretty much every other night. Every night you weren't flying, you were going off to the clubs. There was a little Vietnamese bar, kind of like a little corner bar, right across the street from the hotel, and we sometimes used to hang out there. I actually ended up with a Vietnamese girlfriend that worked in that bar. So we would socialize.

Off-times we'd—occasionally we'd go to the zoo or something like that. Or we'd go down to the clubs, the officers club downtown because they would have entertainment. They'd have a band, usually rarely from the States. Usually the band were from the Philippines or occasionally Japan. Once in a while, you'd get a band from Australia or something like that. And they were playing the current hits, more or less. By current, I mean they were usually six months to a year old, but it was—it was fun to listen—listen to a band—you know, rock band type stuff.

So, yeah, basically every other night, so when we weren't flying, we were out hitting the town. No—

FARKAS: And did you dance in these—so sorry.

STEFFEN: Did you say did we dance?

FARKAS: Yeah, so would you go dancing at these clubs?

STEFFEN: No, no, just sit around because there wasn't anybody to dance with [chuckles], especially at the officers club. It was

just a bunch of guys there. Occasionally we would go to the Vietnamese bars on Tu Do Street, which was downtown Saigon. And, of course, they would have bar girls working there. And some of the clubs had dancing. Most of the guys that I knew that we'd go out with were not really into dancing, so I'd go there and just flirt with the bar girls and buy them drinks, so—Saigon tea, as it was referred to, which was outrageously expensive, so we didn't do that very—very often, because we knew it usually didn't—didn't lead anywhere except to an empty wallet.

FARKAS: What is Saigon tea? Sorry.

STEFFEN: It was just—it was just regular tea, but they—it was served to them in a shot glass, so they would pretend like they were drinking whiskey, and they charged an outrageous price for it, but that was the—that's what you had to pay if you wanted to, you know, talk with one of the—one of the girls there. They'd, you know, sit down and they'd say, "You buy me Saigon tea, G.I.?" Usually—quite frankly, usually we had more money to spend than we knew what to do with over there, so—we frequently would accommodate them and buy them some Saigon tea, but most of us didn't go to the Vietnamese bars down on Tu Do Street that often, just because of the expense.

We did have the, quote and unquote, "Saigon tea" at the bar across the street from our hotel, but since that wasn't right downtown in the entertainment district, the prices were a whole lot—a whole lot lower, more accommodating to our budget, so—

FARKAS: So—and I don't know if this is a difficult subject, but can you tell me how you came to meet your girlfriend?

STEFFEN: Well, she worked in the bar, and we got, you know, talking with her, and I guess we were both somewhat attracted to each other, and so I would usually look her up when I would over—over to the bar. I always tried—tried to get her to go out outside of work, and she never agreed to it my first tour, but then when I came back the second time, about a year later, she was surprised to see me again, and so we started going out.

I remember we spent one very enjoyable Sunday afternoon—she took me out to the Saigon Zoo [and

Botanical Gardens], and it was—it was nice just to do more or less normal type stuff, be out there along with all the rest of the Vietnamese. I was probably one of the few Americans there. But the Vietnamese families were out there with their children and all that at the zoo, and it was very nice to do more or less a normal activity on a Sunday afternoon.

And I remember she—she and her brothers threw me a very nice birthday party. Once again, this was when I was over there the second time. Gave me a very nice birthday present. It was a Buddha carved out of a tiger's tooth that her father had carved, and it was on a gold chain that she gave me, and I still have it, so it meant a fair amount to me at the time, so—yeah, [unintelligible].

FARKAS: Do you remember her name?

STEFFEN: Yeah. Now, whether this was her real name or not—because a lot of the girls that worked in the bar would use what they called a bar name, but certainly the name I knew her—the name was Mai Ly [pronounced MY LEE], so—

FARKAS: And you said you got to meet her family. Can you tell me about them?

STEFFEN: I didn't meet her parents, but I met her brothers. Yeah, I don't—I don't remember what—you know, what they did for a living, but, yeah, they helped prepare the food, and some of my fellow squadron mates—like I said, most of them were—were flying, but a couple or three, the ones that were not flying that evening—we got together and put on our good uniforms. I take it back, actually, for that one. We just wore our regular green utilities, I think. But anyway, we had a birthday party over at her apartment, and they prepared a bunch of Vietnamese food. And, yeah, I had—had a nice time.

FARKAS: So shifting away from that—I feel like we're going into the second tour now—can you tell me anything about going back home: when you went back home, how long you were at home, what you did there?

STEFFEN: Yeah. I went back—let's see; I'm trying to think. I would have gone back I think probably for Christmas leave, went back there probably for a couple of weeks to my parents'—my parents' house there. Went back and saw some of my old

high school classmates. It was kind of—kind of strange sometimes trying to explain to people what I was doing, so I'd kind of avoid that. The conversation would usually go something like, "Hey, Nick, how are you doing?" "Good." "What are you doing?" "Oh, I'm home on leave from the Navy." "Oh, you're in the Navy. I thought you went to college." "Yeah, I went to college." "Well, why are you in the Navy?" "Well, I'm an officer in the Navy." "Oh, so you're aboard a ship." "No, I fly airplanes." "Oh, so you're in the Air Force." "No, I'm in the Navy." "Oh, so what are you doing in the Navy?" "Well, I did a tour in Vietnam." "Vietnam? Well, how many babies did you kill?" And that's usually about the time I'd leave, so—so I got kind of tired of—that got old real quick, so—

FARKAS: So how long—what years were you—what span of time were you home for?

STEFFEN: Oh, just—just a few days and then went back in my squadron back at Patuxent River, Maryland, so—yeah, I guess maybe ten days or so, I guess.

FARKAS: So—hmm. You described a little bit about encountering some of that antiwar sentiment. Is this 1970 now? What year is this?

STEFFEN: Yeah, it would have been, like, 1969, 1970 timeframe, yeah. And it wasn't universal. I mean, most of my—most of my friends were—were good. But I remember a couple that were downright nasty about it. They weren't close friends of mine in high school, but they were, you know, people I'd grown up with and gone to, you know—through elementary school and junior high and high school, so I knew them well. They weren't people that I, you know, hung out with in high school, but certainly people that I would normally say hi to, and vice versa, so—you know, when I would see them when I was—you know, when I was out on the town, to stop in at, you know, one of the local—local bars or, you know, hangouts in town, I'd run into them. A couple of them were, you know, really strong antiwar—which is—that's fine. They were certainly entitled to their opinion, but no need to take it out on the—on the servicemen.

FARKAS: And did you feel that it was being taken out on you? How did *you* feel about the war at that point? Did you have an opinion?

STEFFEN: Yeah, I had—I supported what we—what we were doing over there. I didn't think it was being prosecuted correctly, but that was way above my pay grade. But I didn't support the antiwar protestors. I felt that if people were against the war, the way to do it was at the ballot box, certainly not to protest and disrupt stuff. And I certainly—from a personal standpoint, I certainly didn't like being insulted or called a baby killer, especially considering the fact that we were not doing direct combat missions or anything like that. So I've never killed a person in my life, so— probably saved more. So anyway—yeah, but that was just a couple people that brought that up, in my hometown. Generally speaking, it's—it was a relative—a conservative Midwestern town that normally supported the—supported the military and all that. The knowledge of the—

FARKAS: Can you tell me about the kind of interim time you spent back at the base Stateside? What happened up until you deployed next?

STEFFEN: Yeah. We were—when I was back at—at the parent squadron, back at Patuxent River, when I was flying—I wasn't flying nearly as much as I—as I wanted to. But when I was flying, we were flying oceanographic support missions. We had different—different missions back there.

We had a project called Project Magnet that was measuring the isogonic—the magnetic lines of force on the—all around the world. Unfortunately was not—I was scheduled to go on one of the world trips, as they called—literally—the aircraft literally flew around the world on about a six-week mission, doing this magnetic research. I was supposed to go on one and then for some reason got pulled off, and somebody else put in my place. Don't know what that was—don't really why or how or whatever, but anyway, I didn't get to go.

I did fly some local stuff out of—out of Bermuda, so spent about three weeks—two or three weeks, I guess, in Bermuda. Pretty boring flying. You just basically fly over the water for a couple, three hundred miles and then move over ten miles and fly back again, and then move another ten miles, and kept doing this what they called ten-mile track spacing. And the guys in the back were taking readings and navigation fixes. Basically we were just up there monitoring the autopilot.

The squadron had a couple other missions. One was checking sea surface temperatures, so I did some of the stuff with that. And then the third mission they had was doing Arctic ice research tracking: the ice floes up in the Arctic Circle. And I never got on any of those—those missions.

And then we also did some logistics, flying—one of our aircraft back there was configured to either carry cargo or passengers or a combination of both, and I did—did some of that. These are all the Lockheed Super Constellations, so—and then—

FARKAS: Can you tell me a little bit about—oh, sorry, sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt you.

STEFFEN: No, I was just going to say basically that's what I did up until August of 1970, when I went back for my second tour.

FARKAS: So—

STEFFEN: I was going to ask you: Did you have a question on what else I did back there, or—

FARKAS: Oh, no. I was curious of what daily life was like in that—in that interim period.

STEFFEN: Oh. I lived off base. Rented a place off base with a couple of the other pilots, one of which was this Pete Richardson that I'd mentioned before, Class of '66. And there were three of us renting a place. A pretty nice place, actually, right on—right on Chesapeake Bay. Had our own swimming pool. It was actually the guest house of, like, an estate, and we were renting the guest house.

But a typical day would be going to work in the morning and work in the office and move, you know, paper and pencils around, doing whatever junior officers do with paperwork, filling out reports and going to meetings and stuff like that. Like I said, not doing near as much flying as I wanted, and certainly nothing like the flying we did over in Vietnam. We were flying all the time.

Especially, getting back to that first tour up in Da Nang, we only had—when I was up in Da Nang, we just had two aircraft commanders and one copilot at a time, so up there I

normally flew five, six, even seven nights in a row until I needed a day off, and then usually take a day off and then go back and fly six—five, six nights in a row. And I was getting over a hundred hours of flight time a month up there.

But back in the States, I was lucky if I was probably getting about 20 hours a month [of] flight time, so it was mostly paperwork, administrative functions back there. The—

FARKAS: Now—I'm sorry. Sorry.

STEFFEN: No, I was just going to say the Patuxent River is a town right outside the gate. It's in southern Maryland. Very small town. Almost nothing to do there. They didn't even have any fast food restaurants in the town when I was there, I think probably, like, one movie theater, I think one or two stoplights. There was just—it was not a really great place for a bachelor to be stationed. The married people seemed to love it. It was a great place to raise a family and all that, but just not much going on for—for a bachelor.

I do remember I put some of my Dartmouth skills to use a couple of times. There was a junior college a few miles away, and so I used the old Dartmouth thing back when I was on—before Dartmouth was co-ed. I just called up a dormitory up there one time and asked if there were any girls [laughs] that wanted to go to a party. So it worked at Dartmouth, and it worked back there, too, so—nobody else had thought of doing that, so—so they were surprised. "You mean you can just call up a dormitory and ask girls if they want to go out?" And I said, "Well, that's what we used to do at Dartmouth. Let's see if it works here." And sure enough,—of course, you're usually not getting the cream of the crop that show up at a party like that, but, hey [laughs], beggars can't be choosers.

FARKAS: Interesting. So you go back in August 1970?

STEFFEN: Right.

FARKAS: And at this point, what's your rank?

STEFFEN: I was a lieutenant. I had gotten promotion when I was actually over there the first time, when I was up at Da Nang. And by this time, I *was* an aircraft commander, so I was in charge of the mission when we were flying. But it was—it

was starting to wind down. We no longer had the Da Nang mission. That had shut down. So just the Tan Son Nhut mission. And I was supposed to be over there for six months, but we actually ended winding everything up in about four months and closing down the—closing down the mission. So about—actually, about the last month I was over there, we weren't doing a whole lot of flying, just some training flights to stay proficient. Pretty much had stopped the mission.

Ended up giving me the electronic gear, the TV stuff to—to the Vietnamese and basically gutted the aircraft and flew them back to the States. I was on the last aircraft to come back to the States along with the—the officer in charge of the detachment, so since he outranked me, I wasn't the—I wasn't the aircraft commander on that flight. It was just a—relegated to copilot status since he—I was an O-3, and he was an O-4, so—

FARKAS: Had anything else changed that you noticed when you came back, not necessarily just about your unit but about the feeling in Saigon, the feeling among troops and among civilians?

STEFFEN: I don't recall that there—that there was a really big difference. There might have been, but I—I don't recall. Certainly, there was a little bit more—as I'm trying to think back—there was probably a little bit more hustle and bustle over there than when I was over there in '69. They were already starting to draw down the troops by '70, so there wasn't quite as much stuff going on out of Tan Son Nhut as before.

But I don't recall a big difference. It was pretty much the same. We had improved our office spaces out at the flight line. We no longer were operating out of a tent. We were in a Quonset hut and actually had—actually had an honest-to-God flush toilet in the Quonset hut instead of having to walk down the flight line to use the community latrine, although the community latrine had flush toilets. I don't want to imply that they were using outhouses. But a little bit more privacy with the—with the toilet being right in our—in our Quonset huts, so that was—that was a big improvement.

FARKAS: So—

STEFFEN: But other than that, not a whole lot of changes.

FARKAS: So going back to—to your girlfriend at the time, did you ever tell people back home at all about her?

STEFFEN: Yeah, my family knew about her. I mean, she wasn't a serious girlfriend.

FARKAS: Yeah, yeah.

STEFFEN: Girl. Yeah, they knew—I think I had shown them pictures of her, stuff. Like, I probably still have pictures of her buried away in my slides somewhere.

FARKAS: Did many other of your fellow officers have Vietnamese girlfriends?

STEFFEN: No, they didn't, as a matter of fact. A couple of them did, but most of them didn't have any one particular one. They certainly spent time with the Vietnamese girls, but I don't think any one specific one. But I found one I liked [chuckles], so—

FARKAS: Yeah. So let's see, when did you head back?

STEFFEN: Came back in December. We ferried the airplane back in December of 1970. And that was a fun trip because the aircraft was scheduled to go to what we referred to as "the bone yard." It was going to be scrapped. It was going to go up to Davis-Monthan Air [Force] Base in Tucson, Arizona, to be cut up into—into scrap.

So we asked our commanding officer, who was back in Patuxent River, how soon he needed the airplane back, and he said, "Why? What are you guys thinking about doing?" [Chuckles.] I guess he kind of saw through that. And we said, "Well, we'd kind of like to take our time on the way back." And he said, "Well, within reason, take your time." So we turned it into about a two-week trip to get the airplane back from Vietnam.

So we flew from—and by this time, like I said, all the electronic gear had been taken out of the aircraft. The only seats that were left in it were for the actually on-duty flight crew. So the other people that were riding with us didn't even have seats to sit on. They had to literally strap

themselves to the floor for takeoff. We got some pads, I think, from the hospital there they used to put on gurneys so that they could sleep when they were flying.

But anyway, we flew from Saigon to Taipei [Taiwan], spent about three days in Taipei and went shopping. We had a whole shopping list from the people back in Patuxent River that wanted us to bring back duty free. So we spent three days in Taipei and then up to Yokota [Air Base] in Japan and spent three days up there, the whole time shopping and picking up—the big deal was to pick up either stereo gear or Japan guys bought—I didn't buy any. I had everything that I needed. But bought I don't know how many motorcycles we ended up on the airplane coming back, and hibachi pots and silverware and God knows what. It took—when we finally got to Hawaii, we cleared Customs—we spent about three days in Hawaii. But I think it took nearly three hours to clear Customs in Hawaii, we had so much stuff that had bought.

The airplane was just entirely filled with stuff by the time we got back to the States, with purchases on there. So it started out with basically an empty cargo airplane, and by the time we got back, it was entirely filled with motorcycles, stereo gear, turntables, tape decks, amplifiers, speakers, you name it. Because prices in the overseas exchange were just so cheap compared to what you could buy stuff for back in the States back in those days.

FARKAS: Yeah. So before we—well, actually, so can you tell me what you did next, once you got home, what your assignment was?

STEFFEN: Yeah. It ended up—yeah, I got back to the—my squadron back in December of 1970. I was due to—due to transfer back out of there, just normal rotation, normal transfer, in April, I believe it was. But I didn't particularly want to go through the trouble of trying to find a place to live just for three or four months, you know, so before we actually got back to the States, I'd written a letter to my commanding officer, who was a super nice guy, one of the finest gentlemen I ever met in my life, asking him if he would object if I requested a early transfer. And he didn't, because we were getting rid of the airplanes anyway, so the squadron probably needed to draw down personnel anyway.

So I got orders out to another Super Constellation squadron on the West Coast in January, so I was only back—back there for a couple of weeks, so I worked my Christmas leave back in Minnesota with my transfer to the West Coast, so I was only back in Patuxent River for about two—one or two weeks, at the most, so I just stayed in the bachelor officers quarters there for a few days and then flew back to Minnesota and picked up—spent Christmas there with my family, and—

I had left my brand-new 1970 Dodge Charger that I'd bought when I came back from Vietnam the first time—I'd left it with my brother to use while I was over there the second time. So after Christmas, I got my car back from my brother and drove out to—out to California for my new assignment.

FARKAS: Can you tell me about what you did in California and how long you were there?

STEFFEN: Yeah. I was there for about—hmm—two and a half, three years. Got there. Was flying the same kind of aircraft that I was back in the East Coast, so I didn't have to go through any additional training. And I was assigned to the Pacific Missile Range [Facility], and we did work for—working with the—pretty much the Air Force for part of the space program. Every time they would test one of their ICBMs [intercontinental ballistic missiles] and shoot it downrange, we would go down to the South Pacific to get the reentry telemetry data from the missiles. So we'd usually go down to either Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands or down to American Samoa, down there, and take off prior to the space shot out of Vandenberg Air Force Base and be there to get the reentry telemetry data.

Occasionally, if they were putting a satellite into—into a polar orbit, we'd go up and do—up to Alaska to make sure that we'd get the orbital entry data. So the aircraft were all configured to receive telemetry data from various space shots. So that's what we did out there.

FARKAS: And so during that—during that time, were you thinking at all about Vietnam, about if you'd go back, about what was happening there?

STEFFEN: No. Vietnam was pretty much winding down by that—that time. I do remember that one of the pilots—yeah, it was at

my West Coast station. This was at [the Naval Air Station at] Point Mugu in California. Was due to rotate, and he got orders to Vietnam, even though they were winding it down, and they were asking to volunteers to go out there, and he didn't want to volunteer, so they offered him a spot promotion if he took it, and he still didn't want to go, so they sent him anyway. [Laughs.] I don't know how that worked out for him, but—but, yeah, by—this would have been—you know, by '72 or so they were pretty much—[President Richard M.] Nixon had pretty much declared victory, and we were pulling out.

FARKAS: Now, what did you think about Nixon and that pullout?

STEFFEN: I—I was in favor of Nixon. And, of course, this was before I found out about [the] Watergate [scandal]. But, you know, I supported his policy. I was glad to see that he reinstituted the bombing of the North. I thought [President Lyndon B.] Johnson's policy of starting up and starting the bombing of the North was just idiotic. I mean, it just gives the enemy a chance to rearm and resupply and regroup and all that.

I, by no stretch of the imagination, am a warmonger, but I do feel that if you have to go to war, you should go in there to win it. If you go in there with one hand tied behind your back or, in some cases, both hands tied behind your back, you're just wasting lives on both sides, but certainly you're wasting American lives. And I think that proves out. We ended up not really winning that war at all, and so it was—over 50,000 names on that wall [referring to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall in Washington, D.C.]. And I did not support Johnson's policies, the way he was micromanaging the war. He should have left it up to the military experts to fight it, and if he didn't want to leave it up to the military experts to fight it, then we should have just withdrawn at that time. But that's just—that's my personal opinion.

But, yeah, I was a supporter of Nixon's—going back there with [Operation] Linebacker I and [Operation] Linebacker II. And it worked. It brought the Vietnamese finally to the negotiating table. But, of course, it all kind of went to hell. I think [President Gerald R.] Ford [Jr.] sold them down the—didn't support the Vietnamese afterwards, although Nixon had promised that they would, but then, you know, Watergate was playing? an issue, and the American public

had lost their appetite for—long since lost their appetite for the—for the war, so—

FARKAS: So in terms of that appetite, of course at that time the American public was pretty upset, and I'm curious to know if you heard anything about what was happening at Dartmouth in terms of the Parkhurst [Hall] takeovers, the protests there and what you thought of that.

STEFFEN: I did. I did hear about the sit-in at Parkhurst, and I was, quite frankly, somewhat disgusted at it, but it didn't come as a major surprise to me. I was really disappointed, and still am, that when Dartmouth got ROTC off the campus and for years and years afterwards, I refused to make any contributions to the alumni fund because of that, so I figure, I guess, *If you can protest a war, I can protest the college*, so I didn't—but I've since kind of let bygones be bygones, and I make my token contribution to the alumni fund every year now, so—

FARKAS: Well, of course, ROTC is back, too, so—

STEFFEN: Right, but not NROTC, so—

FARKAS: Ah. I see. And that is, that is important—

STEFFEN: And my understanding is—correct me if I'm wrong—aren't you kind of—isn't ROTC kind of in conjunction with—oh, one of the other colleges up there? You don't actually—

FARKAS: Norwich [pronounced NOR-itch] [University], Norwich.

STEFFEN: Yeah, Norwich. That's the advantage of getting older, Sandor. Things flit in and out of my brain like moths flying around in an attic, I guess. But, yeah, so do you guys actually have an ROTC staff on campus?

FARKAS: Yeah, we have two staff members.

STEFFEN: Yeah, but it's nowhere near like what it was when I was there, when they had–

FARKAS: Oh, no, no.

STEFFEN: Yeah, so—yeah, so it's a mere shadow of its former—former self.

FARKAS: Yeah.

So going back to what you were experiencing in terms of anti-Vietnam sentiment in the United States, what was your take on controversies surrounding atrocities and alleged atrocities committed by troops and the sometimes violent protests around the country, not just at Dartmouth but all of that?

STEFFEN: I was disgusted by all of it. I was horrified to hear about the My Lai Massacre. There were—I know that there were some veterans or servicemen that spoke out and, you know, said, you know, if you weren't—if you weren't there, you shouldn't have an opinion on it or something like that, and I certainly understand, to a certain degree, where they're coming from because certainly I wasn't out in the swamps or out in the jungle carrying a rifle; I wasn't out in the infantry. I had it pretty easy, you know, being in Saigon, and flying aircraft and being able to eat steak or hamburgers every night if I wanted to, and going out and having a girlfriend and whatever.

Having said all of that, there's no excuse for mass murder, and I was also equally horrified when Nixon pardoned [Lt. William L.] [Calley] [Jr., who was convicted for murdering 22 Vietnamese civilians in what became known as the My Lai Massacre]. I think that son of a bitch should have been—well, he was court martialed, but I think he should still be in [the U.S. Penitentiary in] Leavenworth. But certainly no way for an officer to act, and as far as I'm concerned, there was absolutely no excuse for killing unarmed civilians, especially women and children, so I was just totally disgusted by that.

I was equally disgusted by the violent protests that were—I shouldn't say "equally," because it's not the same magnitude, but I was also disgusted by the protests and riots that were going on in this country. And, of course—and a lot of that was also caught up with the civil rights riots and the Detroit [and] Watts riots and riots in D.C. and all that. It was just—it was just a horrible time.

FARKAS: So—and actually, that brings up an interesting point. Earlier, last interview session, we briefly discussed the diversity at Dartmouth during your time there, which—as is obvious,

there wasn't much diversity there. In fact, I recall you saying—

STEFFEN: No.

FARKAS: Yeah. In fact, I recall you saying that you really hadn't ever met an Asian person before going to Vietnam. So after you've had here two tours there, you're seeing all this stuff throughout the country kind of going on and these race riots, what were your thoughts on that? Did going to Vietnam change your thoughts on anything?

STEFFEN: I don't know if going to Vietnam changed things. I mean, I was certainly growing up without any exposure to other races, but I was entirely supportive of civil rights. But I'm not a supporter of violent riots and burning down the cities, so—and I'm still not, so—Ferguson [Missouri, referencing the shooting of Michael Brown] and Baltimore being the most recent. I don't think that that's an appropriate way to react. If you're not happy—I mean, I think there—I certainly can sympathize with their frustration—you know, with frustrations on it, but I think there's more productive ways to channel your energy.

FARKAS: Now, speaking of appropriate actions, can I get your thoughts on [actress and anti-Vietnam war activist] Jane Fonda?

STEFFEN: Oh, God! Yeah, "Hanoi Jane." Yeah. I still haven't forgiven her for what she's done, and if I ever do forgive her, I'll never forget. Yeah. I think she was a traitor. She claims now that she was misunderstood and didn't fully understand what she was doing over there. To me, that's a poor excuse. So, yeah, I've got absolutely no use whatsoever for that woman. And that's all I'm going to say on that.

FARKAS: Yeah. No worries, I—.

So you said you spent around two and a half years in California?

STEFFEN: Right. Yeah.

FARKAS: So that would bring you to around 1972, 1973? Can you tell me what you did next?

STEFFEN: Yeah. I got orders to a [Lockheed] P-3 [Orion] patrol squadron [at the Naval Air Station] in Barbers Point, Hawaii, so after I finished up at Point Mugu, I had to start my flight training to transition to the P-3 aircraft. The training for that was at Moffett Field [Moffett Federal Airfield] in the San Francisco Bay area.

Prior—prior to that it was kind of funny: I had to go through SERE School, S-E-R-E. That stands for Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape. I was supposed to have gone through that school before I went to Vietnam, but, being a typical Navy screw-up, I did two tours in Vietnam and had never been to SERE School. So because I was going to be an air crew member in P-3s and potentially subject to capture or a survival situation at the very least, they decided I needed to go through SERE School before I went to my squadron over [in] Hawaii.

And it was kind of funny because when I showed up there, I had all my ribbons. I showed up in uniform, of course, and I had all my ribbons that I had gotten from over in Vietnam. And plus I was a lieutenant at the time. Normally, you'd be an officer—if you were a pilot, you'd be right out of flight training when you were going through SERE School.

They took one look at my—at the ribbons on my chest and said, "Are you sure you're supposed to be here, sir?" And I said, "Yeah, unfortunately, I've never been through SERE School before." So I was one of the most senior people in my class that was going through SERE School, which did not have its advantages because the senior officers in—they had a simulated prisoner of war compound that they put us in, and typically speaking, in a POW camp the senior officers do not fare real well, so I got—I got the opportunity to experience waterboarding first hand, so—

FARKAS: So actually, I must admit, I forgot to ask you about SERE School in the beginning. I was planning on it, and certainly it seems like an interesting, maybe, mistake. And I know SERE School can be a very rough time, so I don't want to press you for any details, but are there any memories from SERE School, specifically any memories you think are really pertinent to your later experiences, that you want to share?

STEFFEN: Well, yeah. I mean, it was tough. The first few days wasn't that bad because it was primarily a survival situ- —you

know, training. It was done in the high desert of California in the summertime. And they told us right off the bat. They said, “Don’t waste your energy going out there trying to find food. Every week we bring a class out here, so over the year, and it’s always out to the same area, so believe, me,” they said, “all of the animals have long since been either scared off or eaten, so don’t even waste your time trying to find that.” And I guess to make up for that, they did give us some very, very limited rations because there wasn’t any food out there to scrounge, but—but the first part wasn’t that—that bad.

The actual evasion part—you started off in the morning, and we were supposed to try and avoid being caught by the enemy, and if we made it to—we were supposed to try and get to a certain landmark, and if we got there, they rewarded us, I guess, with a cup of water and a sandwich or something like that, and then we’re immediately put into the POW compound.

If we didn’t make it to that place and didn’t get captured, at the end of the exercise they’d blow a horn and we had to turn ourselves in. I figured, *Well, if I make it to that point, they’re gonna put me in the POW compound just that much earlier, and if I get caught out there, they’ll put me into the thing that much earlier.* I figured it wasn’t worth it for a sandwich, so I just hid out in the bush until they blew the whistle. So I never got captured, but I didn’t get my—my half a sandwich or anything.

But they—they put us in—in the compound, and put me, anyway, in a little tiny box. I’m not a very tall person, but even I couldn't stretch out in that box, and I was kept in there over- —overnight. Sometime in the middle of the night, they hauled me out of that thing for interrogation. And I went through the interrogation, and I said—you know, I wouldn’t tell them anything. I figured they weren’t going to actually, well, hit me because they don’t do that kind of stuff.

Well I was wrong about that. [Laughs.] I was wrong about that. [Laughs.] They did punch me up pretty good. So that got my attention real quick. I said, *Oh, jeez, these guys are serious about this stuff.* But all I gave them was name, rank and serial number, so they gave up and returned me to the—my little box.

And then in the morning they brought everybody out, and that's when they started waterboarding people. I think I was about the third person to be waterboarded. Everybody prior to me had—had broken down and just started screaming when they got on the water board. When they brought me up there, I was really pretty concerned on it. When they actually started pouring the water on me—put a rag over your face and pour water on it—and I noticed that one of the supposed enemy soldiers that was holding me down actually had his fingers on my carotid artery, and that's when I realized that he was probably actually a corpsman and was monitoring my vitals, so I figured, *Okay, what's the worst that can happen on here, is that I'll pass out. They're not gonna let me drown.*

So I just relaxed, and so they got tired of pouring water in my face, because I wasn't going to give in. If I passed out, I passed out. And so they quit waterboarding me, so I'm kind of proud of the fact that I'm the only person that they had that never broke on the water board. But I credit that to the fact that I figured out it was the corpsman [chuckles] that was taking part in the exercise, so—

So anyway, after SERE School, went up—went through my I think six weeks of transition training in the P-3s up at Moffett and then went out to Barbers Point, Hawaii, in a fine P-3, doing anti-submarine patrols and stuff like that.

We deployed over to Okinawa and spent six months over in Okinawa. And one interesting side point to that is while we were over there,—about halfway through our deployment in Okinawa, they detached our airplane and crew to go down to the Philippines to support the evacuation of Saigon. This was in April of 1975, when the North Vietnamese were overrunning the South, and they needed to evacuate Saigon. So I was actually flying a P-3 off the coast of South Vietnam the night that Saigon actually fell and thinking to myself at the time, *God, what a—here I am, almost—you know, five years later, still involved in the same damn war and watching it go down the tubes*.

And also I was somewhat concerned about the girl that I knew over there and wondered what was going to happen to her. We hadn't stayed in touch or anything like that, so—but I was still concerned about—about her well-being and all that, so—

FARKAS: So I'm very curious about the fall, but I just want to ask a couple quick questions to frame that. So can you tell me more about the P-3 aircraft and exactly what unit you were with?

STEFFEN: Yeah. Let's see a Lockheed P-3 Orion aircraft. It's a military version. It's not identical, but it's based on the Lockheed [L-188] Electra airliner, but modifications made to it. It's primarily used for anti-submarine patrol, but it's capable of doing a multitude of missions: maritime airborne surveillance. It's also capable of mine laying and stuff like that. But primarily what we did was—well, primarily what we did was training, but when we were deployed, we did out there maritime surveillance, and we also did anti-submarine (ASW) [anti-submarine warfare] training. The aircraft itself is a four-engine turboprop. It carries a crew of about 15. And the squadron I was in was Patrol Squadron 17, VP-17.

FARKAS: So at what point did you find out that you were going to go to the Philippines, that Saigon was fallen? Can you tell me about that progression?

STEFFEN: Well, yeah. We just found out probably a couple, three days before we actually went down to the Philippines. I was happy to go down to the Philippines because I'd been there before and loved the place. We flew every—every night or so for a couple—three or four nights in a—in a row, I guess, providing surveillance off the coast of South Vietnam for the [U.S.] 7th Fleet. I mean, it was a huge endeavor that they had. They had I believe it was two aircraft carriers out there and I don't know how many other support ships. I think all together there were, like, 50—50 ships involved in it.

And I remember—and we flew at night, but I remember taking off there and—you know, late afternoon to get on station and flying out there, and the sun was still up, and you could look out there and see all the fleet out there, and it looked just like a World War II movie with, I mean, Navy ships as far as the eye could see out to the horizon. Never seen anything like that in my life other than, like I said, in World War II movies, so—

And our job was just to make sure that there weren't any surface ships or high-speed boats coming out to try and

attack the fleet. There weren't, but we didn't know that at the time, so just providing surveillance protection for the fleet.

But were monitoring the different frequencies, and they were flying the aircraft into Tan Son Nhut, the Air Force C-130s [Lockheed C-130 Hercules], trying to get as many people out as they could. And about halfway through, when they decided it was no longer safe to get in there, they just had the aircraft turn back, and I remember what a zoo that was because all of these airplanes were returning to either Clark Air Base or the C-141s [Lockheed C-141 Starlifters] were trying to make it back to Anderson Air Field [sic; Anderson Air Force Base] in Guam. And, of course, they all needed flight clearances to get back, and everybody's trying to talk on the same frequency and get a clearance. And it was—it was really hectic there for a while.

We didn't have to worry about that because we were—our job was just to stay on station, but we were monitoring the frequencies of the evacuation aircraft that were literally turned around in mid flight, and told them not to go into Saigon and to return to home base.

FARKAS: So tell me more about what you were thinking about, what you knew about, what was going on on the ground. Are there any—so aside from, as you mentioned, your girlfriend, are there any other people you were specifically worried about?

STEFFEN: Well, yeah, I was worried about our Vietnamese driver, who was kind of an elderly gentleman. He'd—I believe he'd worked for the French Foreign Legion when they were there, so he'd been around for a while. Real nice older guy, but certainly since he'd worked for the Americans, he was at risk. I don't know what happened to him, so I was concerned about—about him as well.

And I was just concerned—I loved the Vietnamese people, and I was just concerned for them in general. I was certainly aware that Saigon was being—was being overrun. I mean, I knew that South Vietnam—I mean I knew the North Vietnamese were proceeding down toward Saigon, so we were—we were obviously aware of what was happening. I don't know for sure, when I started seeing all the images of the helicopters flying out to—out to the aircraft carriers and ditching at sea—I don't know how soon I actually saw, you know, the videos of that. I might have been fairly—fairly soon

because I'm pretty sure that they had Armed Forces television. In fact, I know we had Armed Forces television over in—over in the Philippines at the time, so I was probably pretty—pretty aware of what's—what was going on at the time. And I certainly had seen a whole—whole bunch of stuff since then.

FARKAS: So—so after you get back from this mission, can you tell me about getting back that night? Do you remember much about that night?

STEFFEN: Yeah, well, we were tired. We landed around sunup back in the Philippines and went and—went and got breakfast at the base exchange snack bar. I felt like—even though it was morning and I'd been flying all night, I could have used a cold beer, but they weren't selling beer at that time of day, so [laughs] I think I went with Iced tea instead.

FARKAS: So how did you feel about the U.S. getting out of Vietnam?

STEFFEN: Well, I thought it was probably the—the best of a bad situation. I mean, it became obvious to me that—that we weren't going to fight that war to win it, so if we're not going to fight it, might as well get out, so, yeah—I mean, and we had basically—had pulled all our troops out by—I think it was about, like, '73 or so, so there weren't any combat troops left in—in Vietnam, which is why they were overrun. My understanding is that the agreement that they had signed, Nixon and the South Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese and all that—that if the North Vietnamese violated the—the agreement, that the U.S. would go—go in there and support the South Vietnamese again. But after Watergate, Ford took over and decided not to honor that agreement, so we basically just let South Vietnam go down the tubes, so—

FARKAS: So can you tell me about the next part of your military career? I'm also interested kind of when in your time in the Philippines you ended up meeting your future wife.

STEFFEN: Okay. After—so after Saigon fell, we were down there for, like I said, probably about a week or so. We went back to Okinawa and finished up our deployment in Okinawa and went back to Hawaii. At that time [chuckles], I had a girlfriend in Hawaii, so—so I was glad to get back and see her, who, interestingly enough, was from the—from the Philippines, but not the one I married.

So anyway, back in Hawaii and found out—somewhere—I forget exactly where, but somewhere found out that I had not gotten picked up for promotion, so the Navy has a “up or out” policy, so two strikes and you’re out, so I was—promotions were getting real hard to come by due to Vietnam winding down. They just didn’t need that pilots, and especially they didn’t need P-3 pilots. The promotions were going pretty much to the fighter pilots and that.

So I think we had 11—11 lieutenants in Hawaii up for promotion, and only one guy made it, so long story short, I was involuntarily separated from the service in 1976, so I didn’t want to stay in Hawaii unemployed, so I said goodbye to my girlfriend [chuckles] and went back to Minnesota.

Didn’t try very hard to find a job back then. Drew unemployment for almost—almost a year, plus I had gotten separation pay from the—from the Navy, so—and bought a new pickup truck and put a camper on it and kind of bummed around the country for—for about a year.

I stayed in the Reserves when I was separated, so I took—when I got commissioned at Dartmouth, I was commissioned United States Navy, so when I was released from active duty, you had to take a commission as a United States Naval Reserve [now United States Navy Reserve], which is what I did. But I was too senior to hold a pay billet in the Reserves, so I was in what they called a volunteer training unit, where you just basically drilled once a month for free. But I did that in hopes of eventually getting promoted, which I did. I eventually did get promoted in the Reserves to O-4, to lieutenant commander.

But about a year after I’d gotten out—well, I was trying to get on with the airlines, but there was a recession going on, economic recession going on back then, and the airlines were firing, not hiring, so I didn’t even get a interview with any of the airlines, so I ended up eventually getting a job with a aviation insurance company, working as a customer service representative down in St. Louis, Missouri.

So I moved down to St. Louis. Absolutely hated that job. Just couldn’t stand working in an office and was actually looking for another job when I found out that the Navy realized that they had gotten rid of too many pilots and were literally

begging people to come back on active duty. And since I'd gotten promoted back then, I applied for recall to active duty and got accepted.

Got a call one Saturday at my apartment in St. Louis, one Saturday morning from the [U.S. Navy] Bureau of Naval Personnel in Washington, and some lieutenant was on the other line, asking if I was still interested in coming back on active duty, and I said yes, I was. And I heard somebody in the background say, "Ask him if he would be willing to go overseas." And I heard the guy say, "Would you be willing to go overseas?" And I said, "Why, yeah, sure."

And then I got to thinking, *Oh, wait a second. I better find out where.* So I said, "Well, where exactly did you have in mind?" And he said, "Well, [Naval Air Station] Cubi Point in the Philippines." And I said, "Oh, yeah, I'd love to go there. [Chuckles.] When do you want me back?" And he says, "How can you be—how can you basically have your bags packed?" And I said, "Well, I'd kind of like to go home to Minnesota and see my father before I go over there."

My mother had passed away, by the way, when I was over in deployment in Okinawa, so my father was pretty much by himself, so I wanted to see him before I went back over there. This was, like, in July. So I said, "How about if I go over there in October?" And he said, "No, we need you right away." And I said, "Well, okay, how about September, then?" And he said, "No, we need you right away." And I said, "Well, how about—how about August?" And they said, "Can you make it the first"—they were really in a hurry. So basically I got, like, two weeks there, so I quickly went up to say goodbye to my dad and headed up to—off to the Philippines.

And so I got up there and was flying old [Douglas] DC-3 aircraft. [Chuckles.] Are you familiar with those, Sandor?

FARKAS: No. No.

STEFFEN: Oh. The DC-3. It's a real old airplane. It's a twin-engine tail dragger, but the Navy still had a few of them left, and they were all overseas, so I was flying those. And I guess one of the reasons that I was recalled is that the Navy really *was* short of pilots. They were so short of pilots over there that—normally, a pilot at a air station doesn't do that much flying; he just pretty much keeps his proficiency up, and that's

about it. But they were so short of pilots that I just—that's about all I did now, was fly over there.

We had three [Douglas] C-117s, which was a Navy designation for a DC-3, and we flew all over the Philippines and got up to Taiwan and Japan and Korea, carrying passengers and cargo. Got over to Hong Kong. And so stayed real busy flying.

And then after—it was only supposed to be about a two-year tour, and I got a call in my BOQ [bachelor officers' quarters] room one Saturday morning from the executive officer, asking if I would consider extending my tour over there so that I could go back to the States and pick up a brand-new Beechcraft King Air 200 and ferry it across the Pacific over to the Philippines, so I agreed to do that.

So they sent me back there for—for some flight training at the Beechcraft factory school, and so just before I left to go back there to do that, that's when I asked my Philippine girlfriend if she wanted to—if she would marry me. So we got engaged before I left. Went back there and ended up ferrying the aircraft—actually, went back—the aircraft was not actually built yet. There was some kind of delay on there. So after cooling my heels in Wichita for about a month, the command actually brought me back for Christmas, for a couple of weeks. Flew commercial back to the Philippines.

So I was back there for Christmas, and then they flew me back to the States. The aircraft was finally built, and I met up with another pilot to ferry the airplane. Neither one of us had ever flown that airplane before. We'd been given I think four hours of flight training from Beechcraft, and that was it. That was the extent of our training on the—on the airplane.

And we ferried it out in the wintertime. We had to go up to Alaska because they didn't put any extended-range fuel tanks on it. And we kept running into mechanical problems, and when the Navy had bought these airplanes, they bought a maintenance, service contract from Beechcraft, so because of the contract, all maintenance on the aircraft was supposed to be done by Beechcraft personnel as opposed to Navy personnel. And they didn't have any Beechcraft personnel in place yet because it was a brand-new airplane.

So every time we'd break, we'd have to call Beechcraft, and they'd have to send a mechanic up on a commercial flight to where we were, fix the airplane, and he'd leave. Long story short, we finally—it took us almost a month to ferry that airplane from the United States up to the Philippines, but [chuckles] we got out there, so—

FARKAS: So—sorry. How did you meet your wife?

STEFFEN: Met her—I was out, actually, in town shopping for some furniture to kind of spruce up my BOQ room and stopped in at a little furniture store, and she was—she was working there, and asked me if I wanted a cold beer. I can't imagine furniture stores in the States offering you a cold beer, but they do over in the Philippines, or at least did then. And so we got talking, and so I kept coming back to her furniture store and just started—starting going out.

I started inviting her to—bringing her on base to the officers club and taking her to the social functions on base and spending weekends—a good friend of mine—that I still stayed in touch with from there—had an old 1970 Toyota Land Cruiser, so we used to go exploring in the Philippines with that. He still has the Land Cruiser. He and I still get together to go off-road. Now he lives up in Sacramento, but we stayed in touch.

But anyway, yeah, so we spent time in that, so when I was getting ready—after several months of dating her, when I was getting ready to go back to the States, she mentioned that I might—she might not be there when I got back because she was going to go back to her—the province that she was born in, on a different island, and that's when I got to thinking that, well, I didn't want to let her get away from me [chuckles], so if I wanted to keep her, I better ask her to marry me. So I did.

FARKAS: What's her name, by the way?

STEFFEN: Eledenia [H.] [pronounced el-uh-DEN-yuh], E-l-e-d-e-n-i-a. She goes by "Denya." So—so we got engaged and got married about six months later. Nice military wedding on base, at the base chapel. Had the cross arms, you know, arch with the groomsmen and all that, everybody in their dress uniforms. And a real nice wedding reception. It was the officers club.

FARKAS: Was your father or your siblings there?

STEFFEN: No, I—I didn't invite them because I didn't want them to feel obligated to try and make the trip all the way out there. I knew the heat would just possibly literally but certainly figuratively kill my dad. He just did not—especially in his older age, he did not handle heat and humidity very well, so I think that the trip out to the Philippines would have just been too much for him, because he would have been—I'm trying to think—eighty- —say, he would have been close to 70, and so about my age now [chuckles], but, quite frankly, I'm in a lot better physical shape than he was at the same age, so—so, no, my family wasn't—wasn't there, so—[unintelligible]

FARKAS: So can you tell me about the remaining part of the service? I mean, the remaining part of *your* service, rather.

STEFFEN: Yeah, sure. So after left the Philippines, got orders to—because I was in the Reserves—I got orders to a Reserve base, to be—the Navy had a program called TAR. Stood for Training Administrator Reserves [sic; Training and Administration of the Reserve, now known as FTS, Full Time Support]. It's for active duty people. And their job is to, like the name says, administer and train the—the weekend warriors.

So I was sent to the Naval Air Facility, Detroit, Michigan, which was actually a Selfridge [Air] National Guard Base just outside of Detroit, and was going to be flying the [Douglas] C-118 [Liftmaster] there, which was another real old airplane, a DC-6, four-engine propeller job. But shortly after I got there, they sent the—I got probably about a hundred dollars, and I was just about ready to get checked out as an aircraft commander in it when they got rid of the airplanes and decommissioned the squadron, so since I'd only been there about a year, they didn't want to transfer me again so they sent me just to the Naval Air Facility.

There was a recruiting officer, but shortly after I went to the Air Facility—stayed in the same—we were living in base housing, so I didn't have to move or anything like that, just the change of commands.

They got a Beech [sic; Beechcraft] King Air 200. Well, lo and behold, that was the airplane I had ferried across the Pacific

and set up the training program for over in the Philippines. I was the designated instructor pilot for that. I was the only person in Detroit that had ever flown one, so they made me the head instructor and the standardization officer and the operations officer, in addition to still being the recruiting officer, so—

But I loved that because I had to qualify all the people there, so I was flying my butt off there. I was basically living in a flight suit, flying about a hundred hours a month. Dead tired, but I loved it, so—

And then after I got ready to transfer again, my wife wanted to see the Philippines again, so I requested the Philippines again. Got orders back to the Cubi Point [Naval] Air Station there again, so went back out there. But by that time, they'd gotten rid of their DC-3s, and they just had a couple of King Air 200s, left, so nowhere near as much flying as I'd been doing before.

So spent a couple, three years over there again and then got orders for my last tour at the Naval Air Facility at Washington, D.C., at Andrews Air Force Base [not part of Joint Base Andrews], and flying the King Air 200 there and working—so retired—retired from the Navy in June—my actual retirement ceremony was in June of 1988, but I had about 60 days' terminal leave, so the actual retirement didn't become effective until August.

But I'd already gotten a job with Henson Airlines [now part of American Airlines], so when I started ground school for the airlines, I was still technically on active duty, still on leave from the Navy, but on my terminal leave, so—

FARKAS: And what did you retire as?

STEFFEN: Retired as a lieutenant commander, O-4. The Navy doesn't look real kindly on people who have been passed over a couple of times for promotion, so that was—that was—or for the type aircraft I was flying, so that was—that was as high as I got.

FARKAS: And can you tell me about your times with the airline? Were there many other pilots who had served in Vietnam?

STEFFEN: There were. It never ceases to amaze me how kind of small the world really is. I was going through my ground school for Henson Airlines, which later became—they changed their name to Piedmont Airlines. It's actually a commuter airline for US Airways [now part of American Airlines], wholly-owned subsidiary of US Airways. So flew as US Airways Express.

But I was going through my ground school training there, and I came out on break, and I was going to get a drink of water or something, and I heard somebody call my name, and I turned around. Here was one of their pilots—you know, airline pilots there was my executive officer from when I was over in Cubi in the Philippines. And he and I used to fly together all the time in the Navy. So we ended up eventually flying together occasionally for the airlines, which I thought was kind of small—or kind of strange. Small world.

And then another time, I was walking across the parking lot to the hangar over in Salisbury, Maryland, where the airline is headquartered. I heard somebody call my name, and I looked. I didn't recognize the person, but he was calling me by name. Turns out he was the company vice president, who was Class of '65, a year ahead of me. Was in the NROTC, but a year ahead of me at Dartmouth, and he remembered me from Dartmouth. And he was the airline vice president. Not a pilot himself, but—so—

FARKAS: What was his name?

STEFFEN: [Stephen R.] "Steve" Farrow, F-a-r-r-o-w. Yeah, he's Class of '65.

FARKAS: Have you been in contact with him at all?

STEFFEN: No. No, the airlines are kind of—kind of strange. I don't know if you know how airlines work, but there's an adversarial relationship between management and—we were union, strangely enough. It was in the Air Line Pilots Association [International (ALPA)]. So there was kind of an adversarial relationship between the union and management, so [chuckles] I didn't have much to do with the vice president, so—I mean, when I saw him I'd say hi to him, and we'd visit and chat about Dartmouth or something like that. But since I—since I retired from the airlines, I—I haven't stayed in contact with anybody from—from the airlines at all. I just

walked away from that job and basically never—never looked back, unlike—I've stayed in touch with people from the Navy and a couple—couple people, not very many, a couple people from Dartmouth, a lot more from the Navy than I have from Dartmouth, but nobody from the airline. Even though I was with the airline for nearly 17 years, it's just like, *Okay, I'm outta here.* [Chuckles.]

FARKAS: When did you leave the airline?

STEFFEN: Two thousand four. Back in those days, the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] had a mandatory age 60 retirement. It's since been changed to 65, but back then you had to retire on your 60th birthday, so I retired in October of two thousand—2004, so—

FARKAS: Now, let's see, so looking back over that—over that time after you got out of the military, you wrote on the sheet you brought initially, that initial interview that you joined the Retired Officers Association in 1990?

STEFFEN: Yeah, that sounds—yeah, that sounds about right, yeah, since—the name has since been changed to the Military Officers Association of America, MOAA. They wanted to expand I think their base to include active duty people. But it used to be the Retired Officers Association, and they changed their name to MOAA.

FARKAS: So can you tell me about your involvement with that and any other veterans organizations or groups?

STEFFEN: I wouldn't say I'm really involved in it. I pay my dues, and I—and I read the monthly magazine, and that's pretty much the extent of it. I think there may possibly be a local chapter out here, but I've never gone to any meetings or anything like that, so, yeah, that's basically the extent of it: Pay my dues and read the magazine.

FARKAS: So I have a few very scattered questions that I noted down or forgot to ask over at different points. I looked you up, and it says that you earned a Bronze Star during your time in the Navy. Can you tell me about that and what that was for?

STEFFEN: I didn't actually earn a Bronze Star. I'm not sure where that came from. I think that that might have come from—there was a little—a little Bronze Star in lieu of a second award or

something, but I'm not even sure. No, I did not win the Bronze Star. I did—my highest award—I did get two—was awarded two—two Air Medals from flying over in Vietnam. But, no, I never—never got the Bronze Star.

FARKAS: And an Air Medal is for?

STEFFEN: Well, it can be award—it can be awarded for an individual action, but in my case it's what's they called a strike/flight award. They had a point system set up based on the number and types of combat or combat support missions you flew over there, and depending on whether you encounter hostile fire or actually were—the aircraft was damaged or—well, it depended on how many points you got if you—if you flew a mission, you got so many points—you know, actually, you got a fraction of a point. If you were shot at but they missed, you got more points. If you got shot at and hit, you got still more points. [Chuckles.]

It was kind of a strange system, but anyway, so after a certain number of points and/or flight hours, whichever threshold you reach first, you'd get an Air Medal, so I accumulated enough points to get about two and a half Air Medals, but they don't give you a half of your medal, so I got Two Air Medals.

FARKAS: All right, so—and then at one point, I believe when you were doing the scientific flights on the West Coast, there was a little—little picture and description in the alumni magazine, in the *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine*, talking about what you were doing at that point. Did you submit that to the magazine? Did they call you up and ask for it—

STEFFEN: No, the—I think that was actually when I was in Vietnam, to be honest with you, but that picture—I remember the picture. No, the Navy submitted that. I had no idea that—but the public affairs office in the Navy apparently submitted it to—to the college, and the college decided to publish it, so—

FARKAS: Interesting.

All right, so when you were in Okinawa,—

STEFFEN: Mm-hm.

FARKAS: —I've heard—I've heard that there was a lot of antiwar, veteran antiwar sentiment going on in Okinawa. Were you exposed to any of that?

STEFFEN: No. There was—it wasn't so much anti- —well, by the time I was over there, like I said, the war had pretty much wound down. Saigon had—well, was in the process of falling while I was there, but all of the combat troops had been pulled out of South Vietnam a couple years earlier, so there really wasn't anything to protest.

There were some protests going on—some of the local populace didn't like the idea of having U.S. military bases on Okinawan soil. Of course, my answer to that is: Then they shouldn't have lost the war. They shouldn't have started it in the first place. But anyway, I think that was primarily it. They didn't want the U.S. bases there. In some cases, they may have had some legitimate concerns due to safety. There were a couple of plane crashes, or they crashed—you know, I don't think while I was over there, but over the period of years, there have been some military aircraft accidents that occurred in—you know, and destroyed some civilian structures and may have killed some civilians. But they were entirely accidents, much like that air show accident over in England recently. You know, it's unfortunate, but if you live around, you know, an air base or an airport, civilian or military, there's always a chance that there's going to be an accident somewhere near there. So I think that was part of the—part of the concern.

But there is always a vocal minority of people that wanted the Americans out of Japan, but I don't think it had anything particularly to do with Vietnam, due to the fact that Vietnam was no longer—as we used to say in the Navy, it was OBE, overcome by events. I mean, we weren't there anymore, so nothing to protest other than the presence in Okinawa.

FARKAS: So I have a few questions for you, general questions, looking back on your service, on the time after your service, on current events as they relate to your time in Vietnam. So have you ever considered going back to Vietnam? What do you think of the current Vietnamese government?

STEFFEN: I wouldn't mind going back to Vietnam, but—I'd kind of like to go back there, but it's—as far as higher travel priorities, I've never been to Europe, so if I was going to spend that kind of

money, I'd probably rather go to Europe and see someplace that I haven't already, you know, been to. But certainly I wouldn't—you know, I'd like to—if somebody wanted to pay for a trip, I'd [chuckles]—I'd go in a heartbeat. I know my wife would like to go back to the—go back to the Philippines, so you can maybe kill two birds with one stone.

But her relative- —her sister, who she hadn't seen in nearly 30 years, was just here a few weeks ago to visit, and—boy, that trip. It just reminded me. I don't need to make any trips like that. [Chuckles.] That was, like—I mean, everything went smoothly, but just such a long—you know, flight. They flew from Manila to Narita, Japan, and then for some reason they flew into Detroit, and then Detroit out here, Las Vegas. Ah, better them than me, so—yeah. Yeah, I'd like to see Vietnam again, but the—but the thought of flying one more time across "the pond" is just daunting.

FARKAS: And the current government there?

STEFFEN: Yeah. It is what it is. I actually think they're still, you know, exercising too much control, and they're still not completely free, but they've got—but they're no longer communist, I guess, or something like that. They certainly opened, you know, up to foreign investment and a lot of foreign companies are over there now and a lot of tourism and all that. I liked Vietnam when I was over there. I loved the Vietnam people. I liked Saigon, a very vibrant city—you know, except for the occasional rocket attacks, so, you know, I liked being over there.

I wish I could have seen a little bit of Da Nang. When I was up in Da Nang, we were not authorized liberty, so we couldn't—we were not allowed to leave the base, so I didn't get a chance to see really anything of Da Nang up there, so—

But, yeah, I don't harbor any ill will against the Vietnam government. And in fact, they seem to be more of any ally now with China rearing its ugly head with the Spratly Islands out there in the South China Sea. It's gotten the Philippines wishing that they hadn't have gotten rid of their U.S. bases as well, so it seems like nobody wants the U.S. around until the time that they need us to carry their water for them, and then they're pretty anxious to have us come back, but that—but that's the way it's always been, so—

FARKAS: Now, speaking of U.S. foreign policy, a lot of people like to compare Vietnam to at least America's later was, for example, Iraq or Afghanistan.

STEFFEN: Mm-hm.

FARKAS: I'm curious what you think about those comparisons, both on a personal level and on a more technical, historical level.

STEFFEN: Well, I think there's—I think there can be a basis of a certain, you know, comparison in the sense that, in a way, they were both kind of wars of choice on our part. I didn't—I mean, we started sending advisers into Vietnam before I really became really aware of what was going on. I was still in high school and all that.

But certainly when you talk about Iraq and all that, I had—I didn't know whether there were weapons of mass destruction over there or not. Our intelligence said they did. I don't for one minute thing that the [President George W.] Bush administration intentionally misled people or lied. I think that they just had faulty intelligence. I don't think it was an effort to bamboozle the American people or not, but it turned out that there weren't weapons of mass destruction there.

Certainly Saddam Hussein [Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti] was—was not a good person. But I had grave reservations about us going—going in there, and I based a lot of that on my experience with Vietnam because I predicted, and I think rightfully so, that what was going to happen was that we were going to go over there, things weren't going to go as smoothly, as rapidly as predicted—wars rarely do—and the American public was going to—was going to tire of it quickly.

I don't know if it's a short attention span or just lose interest in it or don't want to see Americans coming home in body bags. I don't know what it is, but they lose the interest or the will to see the job through, and I figure—I told my wife before—even before the first attacks in Iraq—I said, "I wish we wouldn't be doing this because I don't think it's gonna end well." And it looks like I was borne out.

You know, you go in there and lose a few thousand American lives and then say, "Well, we'll just go ahead and

pull out," with nothing to show for it, so I'm of the belief of if you *are* going to go in there and put American lives at risk, you go in there and fight to win, and if it's—if it's not worth winning, then it's not worth fighting—and we shouldn't—shouldn't be in there in the first place.

So you either suck it up and deal with not trying to change some other company—country's policy and just live with the way they're acting, or of you are going to go to war, go in there and go for an unconditional surrender like in World War II, where you fight it to the finish. I don't think you can fight a war halfway or have it make any sense. You know, in football if you have a tie game, everybody comes away dissatisfied, but, well, you're not having to bury anybody. But when you come away with a tie after this and you've just wasted—to me, you've just wasted lives, so if you haven't accomplished anything, what's the point of going in the first place? But that's the way I feel about it. I think we need to be a lot more careful about getting into military action, but if we are going to go in there, I don't see how you can fight a limited war.

I understand the geopolitical stuff in there. You know, certainly in Vietnam there was Russia to worry about, and Johnson was worried about, "Well, if we escalate this too much, then Russia is going to get involved." Well, maybe that should have been thought of—thought about before we got in there or something, but, you know, fighting proxy wars or something—

But I also believe that there are times when you have to—have to stand up and put stuff on the line; otherwise, you get pushed around like what's happening over in Crimea and the Ukraine. If you're just saying, "Well, we don't want you to go there." "Well, okay, now you're there. We don't want you to go anywhere else." "Well, okay, you went somewhere else, but we really don't want you to go to *this* country."

Yeah, if you don't stand up to a bully, you're going to be bullied, so you have to make the decision. But anyway, that's my perspective on what's going on.

FARKAS: Any—any lingering thoughts on the treatment you received as a veteran, on your interactions with people after the Vietnam War?

STEFFEN: Well, recently it's been real good. You know, ever since the first Gulf War, the one that we won in three days, or whatever it was, in Kuwait—and now it seems like the military is the darling of the American public. And even the left that's opposed to the war, I guess has possibly learned a lesson from Vietnam that—you know, that it makes more sense from—if you're going to oppose something from the strategical opposition, it makes more sense to oppose a policy and not the—and not the troops, whereas before, during Vietnam, they opposed not only the policy but they opposed the government as well as the individual service members. And you're in ROTC, so you got to know that normally privates and sergeants and lieutenants are—rarely make policy or strategy, so to take it out on them was just—was just foolish, you know.

But anyway, but no, my treatment as a—as a veteran is—lately it's been real good. I'm surprised at the number of places, or at least out here, [that] offer veterans' discount. I get veterans' discount almost everywhere—almost everywhere I go. Even on certain days, even the supermarkets give, like, a 10 percent discount to veterans. I was just—just this morning—that's why I was out running errands. I was shopping for new tires for my Jeep, and the tire place offers a veteran's discount, so, yeah, being treated well.

One of the reasons that we relocated out to the Las Vegas area [is] we wanted to get away from the East Coast. But there's Nellis Air Force Base out here, and I go out to the base occasionally. I get all my medical care out at the—out at the base, just because I prefer to get it out there as opposed to going to a civilian doctor. I enjoy going out to the base, and I use the base facilities: the commissary and the exchange and the fitness facility out there, so—yeah, certainly my treatment in the last few years as a veteran has been great.

I have not had any contact whatsoever, though, with the VA [U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, also known as the Veterans Administration], so I can't comment on—on what the VA is like as far as, you know, medical care, anyway. I just—I don't use it.

FARKAS: And any thoughts on how your Dartmouth experience has affected not only just your time in Vietnam but your time after Vietnam and the rest of your life?

STEFFEN: I don't know. I mean, I certainly got a really good education at Dartmouth, but as far as—as—as helping me, especially in the Navy or the airline, you know, basically they don't care where you went to school [chuckles], to be honest with you. I mean, in the Navy it probably would have helped a little bit if I had gone to the Naval Academy, but other than that, to be honest with you, I don't know that most of the people were any more impressed with somebody that went to an Ivy League college and somebody that went to Podunk State [a term for an insignificant college, not a real institution].

You know, they seemed to be more impressed, at least initially, with what kind of grades you got. If anything, I might have done better by going to, you know, my state college in my home town and getting better grades than competing against the elite, you know, from the high schools around the country at Dartmouth. I certainly didn't graduate anywhere near the top of my class [chuckles] at Dartmouth, whereas I might have had a shot at it if I'd gone to Winona State or something like that, so—

But, yeah, I certainly got a really good education and a different type of an education. You know, it was a little arts education, and I think that that's helped—it's given me perhaps a broader range of interests than, say, a lot of people might have—might have had. But not necessarily.

My friend that I mentioned that was up in Sacramento, that—he and I get together to go off-roading in either my Jeep or his old Land Cruiser. He went to San Jose State [University], but, you know, when it comes to—I wouldn't want to—I wouldn't want to compete against him on *Jeopardy!* Let me put it that way. Especially if it had anything to do with European history or—and he was not a history major; he was a chemistry major, but he knows far more about European history than I'll ever know.

So, yeah, I'm not so sure—

FARKAS: So—

STEFFEN: I'm not sure [unintelligible]—

FARKAS: So my second-to-last question—

STEFFEN: —all that great, but—yeah, go ahead.

FARKAS: [Chuckles.] How'd you find out about the Dartmouth Vietnam Project, and what made you agree to do it?

STEFFEN: I don't remember. I must have seen something maybe on one of the e-mails or possibly the alumni magazine or something like that. I honestly don't remember. I said, *What the heck, I'll throw my name in the hat, and if anybody's interested*—because I thought—I think it's a worthwhile project, and especially in this day and age, I would think that there are probably relatively few Dartmouth graduates that are going into the military now, with the limited ROTC on campus and certainly, you know, people don't have to worry about the draft or anything like that, so I think that—

And Dartmouth, going back to World War II, has got a very proud tradition of supplying officers to the military, going back actually to the Civil War. But over recent years, I think it's kind of fizzled out, so anything I can do to help keep the tradition alive, I'm willing to do.

FARKAS: Well, I just wanted to thank you for your participation in this project, for agreeing to sit down, virtually sit down with me and do this interview. It's been a pleasure getting to hear your story, and thank you so much.

STEFFEN: Okay. Well, you're welcome. And if you've got—if you're going over your notes and you need to clarify anything, feel free to either call or e-mail. I'm available [chuckles], most of the time, anyway.

FARKAS: Well, thank you.

STEFFEN: Okay.

[End of interview.]