Robert E. Thebodo
Dartmouth College Oral History Program
Dartmouth Vietnam Project
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Transcribed by Karen Navarro

HUNTER: This is Ali Hunter, Class of 2019 at Dartmouth College. I am sitting in Rauner [Special Collections] Library in Hanover, New Hampshire with Mr. Thebodo. Bob?

THEBODO: Yeah, Bob is fine.

HUNTER: Okay. It is May 14, 2018, and this interview is being conducted as part of the Dartmouth Vietnam Project. So, hi, thank you so much for coming. We really appreciate your input and your effort to be here. I'd like to start at the beginning. Would you mind telling me a bit about when and where you were born?

THEBODO: I was born August 14th, 1949, in Worcester, Massachusetts.

HUNTER: And what were your parents like? What did they do?

THEBODO: My dad worked in a factory. My mom was a homemaker. My dad had been in the Navy during World War II, and was very proud of that. He was Catholic, and that's an important part of my upbringing. My mother was not, and she supported my dad in that. We were brought up in a positive setting. I don't want to… We were brought up in a very loving environment. My parents worked hard. My dad, not only did he work in a factory, he worked in a moving truck. He brought the money home and my mom took care of the family, and that's the old traditional, I guess, way things were done, at least how I knew them growing up. And we were loved. We got spanked. It was just my sister and I. If we did wrong and it was bad enough, there were spankings. But there were a lot of hugs, too, and that was really important. You know, I remember it as being a small town. It's certainly not as small as where we live now, my wife and I, in Lyme [NH], because we lived right in the center of town in Leicester. But, God, I…

HUNTER: Would you mind telling me what your parents' names were?

THEBODO: Edward [Edward M. Thebodo, Jr.] and she was known as "Nonie" [R. Lenore "Nonie" Thebodo]. And the funny thing about that is when I met my wife, I'd never met another

Nonie in my life. I mean, my mom was Nonie and that was it. My wife's nickname was "Nonie." [laughter] It had nothing to do with me going out with her. It was like *ah, come on*. But anyway, well, they were married over 60 years. So, they were good together.

HUNTER: And you mentioned you had a sister. Do you have any other siblings?

THEBODO: Nope, just my sister. Yep, and she's still alive. Both my parents passed away just a few years back. And my mom in 2012, my dad in '15. Fortunately I was able to retire before they passed away, and I was able to spend a little bit more time with them. And that was really important for me, and I think for them, too, since we didn't live real close. We didn't have to fly, but a three hour drive, it's a bit of a trek, so… Anyway…

HUNTER: You mentioned your dad was in the Navy. Did that sort of influence your childhood and growing up?

THEBODO: Well, yes, it did. My dad quit high school to join the Navy. He wanted to be in the Marines, but he had some injuries as a kid that kept him from doing that, so he basically… I think he did a little lying to get into the Navy. But, that generation, it was really important for them to serve. And it really did make a big influence on me. I always knew my dad was in the Navy. He used to tell me stories. He won the war, you know, these kinds of things. I always liked war movies as a kid. They were fun, and my dad would play along with that. But he was very serious, on the other hand. You know, this wasn't a—war wasn't a pretty thing. And he was fortunate enough to get out and with only a few minor injuries, you know, accidental things that happened. And so, he was in at the end of the war, and yes, it did, it made a huge influence on my deciding what to do when the time came.

And I was a Boy Scout. I loved being outside. I was an Eagle Scout. I spent—that was what I did as a kid, you know, being in the woods and being at camp. And I got a chance to work on the junior staff at the Scout camp. I didn't get any money, and that upset my dad a little bit that I worked all summer and I came home and I had a tan and no money. [laughter] But, I never got in any trouble. And, you know, I think that's an important thing, as I look back, I never got in any trouble. I didn't drink. About the only thing we really did that was

evil—this was a Boy Scout camp—is, you know, we got caught skinny dipping once by the police. A bunch of boys swimming across the pond on their night off. That was the wild thing. And yeah, it was dangerous, but that's what we did. So, eh, I can live with that reputation, you know, especially these days. I still love the water and I still work on waterfronts. So…

HUNTER: And would you mind telling me a little bit about the town and the area you grew up in?

THEBODO: Yeah, Leicester, Massachusetts. God, a small town, I can't remember, I think they were just a little over a hundred in our high school graduating class. Little League was big. I did love baseball. That's another thing that I did do. A lot of basketball. They had outdoor courts. I was awful. I never made a team. [laughter] But I did shoot a lot of baskets. There was no soccer. My mom wouldn't let me play football because she was afraid I'd get hurt. She considered it to be a really dangerous sport. And I guess I'm kind of glad. But she let me play baseball, and I was a catcher, and I don't think she had a clue what was involved in being a catcher.

But, in the end, instead of playing football, I swam at the YMCA weeknights on a swim team. I was awful. But I did it for two years, and gees, the guys that I swam with were all pretty good. I had to practice with the "A" team, just because of the timeline. I lived out of town and I had to take the bus in. I used to hitchhike and save the money so I could buy pies afterwards, you know, a little chubby kid. But the guys that I swam with were all really good. It was the "A" team, and they always made me feel great, you know, even in competitions. I only went to a few swim meets, but we got to swim every night. I mean, we swam hard every night. And they worked with me, and God, I felt really good about it. I didn't feel like the last place guy. And the whole deal was as long as you bettered your best time, you won. There were no medals, there were no anything. And I was kind of bashful as a kid, and God, I didn't want to wear one of those racing suits until it rotted, and then they made me. And, you know, one of these stories that, it just it fell apart. [laughter] So they finally got me this bathing suit that I had to wear.

But, you know, I did play baseball my junior and senior year in high school, and I was good friends with this one guy that, he was in our Scout troop, and boy, he was really athletic,

very athletic. He was one of those guys that could climb that rope to the ceiling, hand over hand with his feet straight out, gymnastic. And he enlisted in the Marine Corps. And I think that's when the Vietnam War started to become a harsh reality beyond the news is when they brought his body home. It was one of those things that your hair kind of stands up a little bit, you know, all of a sudden. They named a road after him. And it scared me to death.

You know, growing up, I don't mean to ramble on here, but one of the things in Boy Scouts is you have to earn certain merit badges, and one of the merit badges that I needed to get was citizenship merit badges. And there was citizenship in the home, citizenship in the nation, and citizenship in the world. I think, I can't remember, but I think it was citizenship in the nation, you had to write a report—no, citizenship in the world, because you had to write a report on a world event, and I write a report on a *Life Magazine* article about Vietnam. It was awful. I mean, the pictures were very graphic of Marines burning a village. And I'm more likely to look at the pictures than read the whole article. The article really bothered me. And in all honesty, I didn't want anything to do with it. I didn't want anything to do with the war. It scared me. And yet, back in '66, '67, I'm not going to say the war was popular, but if you were in the service, things hadn't gone crazy, it seemed, at that point in time.

I graduated from high school and I had no idea what I wanted to do. My mom wanted me to go to school. I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I worked in my grandfather's machine shop for a while. And behind her back—she's a police officer now [laughter]—behind her back, I visited all of these recruiters, and decided the Coast Guard. This was, for me, this was the honorable way of dealing with anything that I had for concerns about a war and still joining what I considered at the time, and I started referring to it as the humanitarian service. At the time it was under the Department of Transportation. I went down and I spoke with all these different recruiters. The Coast Guard recruiter wouldn't guarantee me anything, but told me the likelihood of going to Vietnam was practically zilch. In order to go, you really—they used it as a re-enlistment tool for people who had been in for a while. And I thought to myself, *No problem. I see no conflict here*.

So I enlisted in the Coast Guard, and when I came home to tell my mother, she told me "no." She wasn't going to let me go. [laughter] I said, "Mom, I already enlisted." I was 18. Boy, I'll tell you, she was so mad at me. I mean, I remember her crying, that she did not want to see me go. My dad, he wanted to side with my mother, but I think he was really proud of the fact that I had done that. One of my cousins got drafted, and he deserted from the Army. His brother took off and went to Canada. And, you know, call them "draft dodgers" and call them whatever you want. I don't blame them. I mean, in all honesty, people were looking down at these things. And yeah, okay, I felt like this was really an honorable thing that I could do. Boot camp, awful. [laughter] It's the worst club I've ever been to.

HUNTER: If you don't mind, because we are going to talk about all those things. You just spoke about…

THEBODO: Yeah, I told you I'd ramble. [laughter]

HUNTER: It's great. Just when you were talking about high school and this report and stuff. Would you mind talking a little bit more about what was kind of the perspective on Vietnam that was happening as you were still pre-graduation?

THEBODO: There wasn't much. Everybody was going to college. I can't remember anyone talking about enlisting in the military. There might have been a couple of people, but they weren't in what I call my circle of friends and people that I regularly associated with. It was either college or a tech school or… that was about it. And the draft was hot and heavy then. I mean, the draft was a force to be reckoned with. I was only 17 when I graduated from high school, so I didn't have to worry about it right away. I had some time. But, as soon as you turned 18, you had to register, and as soon as you turned 19, you were gone, unless you were in college or had some kind of a deferment. And people got deferments for all kinds of things. But, my high school class, there were more people that went in the Peace Corps than went to Vietnam. In fact, I'm the only… We just had our 50th reunion this past October, and I'm the only surviving Vietnam veteran in my class. There weren't very many. But, I'm the only one. And that's kind of, it's sad.

But, the attitude about Vietnam, I don't know, it's like it was somewhere else, and you didn't really… I think I worried

about it more because of the report that I wrote, and my cousins. They were a little older than me and they were dealing with this.

HUNTER: Do you remember what year that that was?

THEBODO: That was ’66. ’65-’66. I graduated from high school in ’67. And ’67, things started to get really dicey over there. I mean, boot camp—I know I’m diversing a little bit—but, in my cousin’s defense when he deserted, he had never been anywhere where somebody made him do pushups or run a mile just because it was there. He couldn’t handle that. And his brother, who was just a little bit younger than him, he got into acid and a different lifestyle, and it was our parish priest that helped him go to Canada. And boy, my dad was really mad about that. I mean, he was really upset that that happened. But, that was just conversation in a family. It wasn’t conversation to my uncle or my aunt or anything. It was one of those, you know, TV time conversations that, “Yeah, I guess Mark’s gone now.” And it was Father [Bernard “Bernie” E.] Gilgun that helped him do it. And he was very vocal, our priest. Our parish priest was very vocal against the war. So my confirmation class got an earful of, not only the war in Vietnam, but “open and free sex,” which was a shocker from your parish priest in your confirmation class.

HUNTER: And this was in Leicester?

THEBODO: This was in Leicester, yeah. And I don’t know if he was excommunicated after a while, but he was quite the character. And, you know, I’ve got to say looking back, I’ve got to give him a pat on the shoulder. He professed what he believed in. The open sexuality thing, I mean, things were getting a little different back in those days, you know. Burning draft cards and—you didn’t see that in Leicester. You just didn’t see it. In fact, that didn’t come along until, I think, well, actually when I came home from Vietnam, it was at its peak. I couldn’t come home from Vietnam at a worse time, [laughter] as far as social interaction goes. But, that’s further down the road.

But, you know, the social fabric back then was kind of mixed. There was that World War II generation that fought to save the country, and they believed that “we’re fighting Communism, and it has to be stopped. And so, therefore,

this is a good and righteous war." You remember hearing those things. And then there's Father Gilgun talking about how horrible it is. And in the back of mind I'm sitting there remembering this report I wrote. I mean, the *Life Magazine* article really struck home.

But, my grandfather—and I'm regressing, and I apologize for this—but the first time I heard of Vietnam, and I can't remember what year it was, but my granddad had *National Geographic's* that go back to the black-and-white, and I used to thumb through them. And my grandfather called me in the living room one night, and he said, "I've gotta tell you something." His nephew had been in the Army. He was a sharpshooter, but he was also an interpreter, and he had just been sent to Southeast Asia as an interpreter. He was one of the first—what do they call them—God, I tell you, the mind is starting to [laughter] mush up a little bit and I apologize for that. They helped train the…

HUNTER: Like advisors?

THEBODO: Yeah, an advisor, yes, that's exactly right. He was there as an advisor. And my grandfather had this *National Geographic* book, an article, talking about, you know, it was the French had been kicked out of South Vietnam and there was an American presence starting to form, and his nephew was part of it. And I just remember my grandfather telling me, "You're gonna hear a lot more about this in years to come." And I was only a little kid then. So, yeah, I remembered that. And I don't know what happened to his nephew. We never talked more about it. I never even met the guy. But I just thought it was interesting that my grandfather saw that. My grandfather was in World War I. He was in Europe and he was one of the troops that [General John] Pershing had set to go into Russia before… Pershing wanted to invade Russia. I'm really regressing now. But, you know, this was my grandfather. And, so I don't want to tell you that I come from a long line of warriors. I don't know if my grandfather was drafted or what. But, he served in the Army in World War I. My dad served in the Navy in World War II. I just couldn't not do anything, if you catch my drift. It just wasn't the moral right. So…

HUNTER: If you don't mind me asking, did your sort of, you were feeling slightly critical of the Vietnam War, did that produce

any sort of conflict? Were you worried about any conflict with your father?

THEBODO: Oh, no. Like I said, my mother was just livid that I enlisted in anything. You know, mom, that's just a mom being a mom. And that was my mom. And after a while, I think she was very proud of me. I assured her that "look, this Vietnam thing, you don't have to worry about it. I'm probably going to be on Cape Cod." That was my hope and dream. What I knew about the Coast Guard was so little, it's almost pathetic. [I just read the brochures and I knew I wasn't guaranteed anything.

But no, it didn't cause any conflict. In fact, God, just before I left… I didn't drink. And my dad wasn't a heavy drinker, but I don't know, maybe it was a week or so before I went to boot camp, he bought a case of beer and we went out and sat on the front lawn. Now, you gotta see our front lawn. It's Main Street Leicester. And we're sitting out there, and he gives me a beer, and we sat out there, and I'm not going to say we got shit-faced, but it was a Dad-son thing. My dad wanted to have a few beers with me, and I said he got a case. He did and we didn't finish it. But I'll never forget the police cruiser stopping in front and say, "Hey, what's going on?" And he said, "Oh, Bobby's going to the Coast Guard next week." And he said, "Oh, well, have one for me." You wouldn't have that today. It wouldn't happen today. And like I said, I think my dad was proud of me. And that was important. And I don't know where you want me to go from here, because…

HUNTER: That's okay.

THEBODO: You know… [Both talk at the same time.] Go ahead.

HUNTER: Oh, I was just going to… So you, after you made the decision to enlist, were you the only one in your class who was in the Coast Guard or were there others?

THEBODO: I was it. No, I was it. And you know what? I did wind up, when I wound up in "A" school, which is, you know, you go to boot camp, and God, if you're lucky enough, and it's hard today, back then there was a heavy turnover in the Coast Guard. So, schools were available. And I wanted to be an electrician. I wanted to go to electrician school. They sent me to electronics school, because they needed more of those. But I checked off something with an "e" in it, so that's,

they can do anything they want with you after you're in. I mean, you learn that very quickly, so, learn when to duck and learn when to raise your hand. It's one of those things. But I did wind up with one of my friends from Boy Scouts in a different "A" school at a different time. And I think—I couldn't be absolutely certain—but I think he found out that I went in, and we were Boy Scouts together, so he enlisted. He didn't know what he wanted to do either.

But, I gotta tell you, there was nothing easy about the Coast Guard. He wound up dropping out of "A" school, and he got discharged, and that was that. I kept going. And I wound up in electronics. I was never a great student. And I'm not bragging and I'm not—I just, when I learn something, I retain it. It just takes me a little longer to stuff it down the head. I graduated from "A" school, from electronics school basically right around the last of my class. But everybody had the option of going to different schools, and I decided I didn't want to go to school anymore. I just wanted to go out and be in the Coast Guard. And, so that was what I chose. And we wound up getting orders based on our standing in class.

I wound up with, not only did I get a school, but it came with an assignment to a LORAN station in Vietnam. And I thought, "No." I gotta tell you, when I got my orders, I kind of laughed at first, but I think it was more of a nervous laugh. And once you got your orders, you couldn't swap with anybody. There were some guys that wanted that. Nobody really knew what it was. And bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, and those were the ones that I caught. So, instead of going to a school of choice, I wound up having to go to school for another two months to learn LORAN, and if you're not familiar with it, it's Long Range Aids to Navigation. The Coast Guard is responsible for navigational aids. Any of the navigation buoys you see, lighthouses. Not satellites.

And it was—the LORAN system that I worked on was the most sophisticated navigation system in the world, without question at that time, and therefore, the two month training. And here I am an E-3 right out of "A" school going into this school, and they sent me to Vietnam, and I was in a pay billet—I was an E-3 in an E-6 billet out of 9 pay billets. And the responsibilities that I had when I first got there were like, I was way over my head. But, you know, you either stick with it or you die. I mean, I'm talking about professionally, now. But you know, the military's a hard, it's a hard knock no

matter how you work it. But anyway, I wound out with a set of orders to Vietnam.

Now, I've gotta tell you, when I came home after that weekend, my mom was all excited, "Okay, where are you going? Where are you going?" When I told her, and it was not easy to tell her, "Oh, no, no, no, no." It was like, I'll tell you, my house was, there were a lot of tears. My sister was all upset. You know, she's three years younger than I am, and she's my baby sister. Nobody could believe it. I couldn't believe it. I mean, the only thing you know about Vietnam is what you see on the news. And it didn't look good. I was not at all excited about that. And, fortunately, during the two months of school that I went to, I wound up with other people going to all the LORAN stations, and some of them had been to Vietnam. Some of them had been to Vietnam on the 82-footers. This was the Riverine patrols, and had taken fire, had actually been in combat and had been through that SERE training that they have to go through. I didn't have to go through any of that. It was tough enough having to deal with it. But, it was two months of intensive training to go there.

HUNTER: Can you tell me about sort of what the training was and what you were being trained to do?

THEBODO: It was all technical. They actually had operational… There's a transmitter and there's a timing mechanism, and, well, the timer is about the size of that thing right there [points at something] and it's all, back then it was still all tubes. Everything was tubes, synchronized servos and synchros. It was must a mechanical, electronic super clock. I don't know how else to define it. And there were four slave stations that translated a signal at different times, and then there was the—one of them was the master, the first one, and then there's the monitor station that made sure that everybody was in sync. And with the proper receiver, you can determine where you are based on, it's a triangulation, but it's all electronics. And the system was accurate, depending on your receiver, to within plus or minus a foot in a thousand mile radius. I mean, this was incredible. The bigger LORAN chains, they were plus or minus about a hundred feet or so. They're pretty accurate. So if you're on a ship, you know, plus or minus a hundred feet out at sea in a storm, you're going to get where you need to go. But in an aircraft at 35,000 feet, flying at God knows what speed, that's quick,

and that's what we provided our signal for was for the Air Force. And did others use it? Yes, I'm sure that, you know, anybody with a LORAN receiver would use it. Why wouldn't they? It was easy enough to duplicate. And commercial fishermen had them. It was LORAN-A, and it started out with Decca [Navigator System], and then they had LORAN-A, LORAN-C, and then there was this superstation that we had.

So, the work was hard. But, I don't know, it was, they say it was safer. God, the things you wind up being exposed to over time that you didn't know about when you were younger. I mean, you hear about Agent Orange and how it was used as defoliant. Well, they used Agent Orange so that all the vegetation in the antenna field could be controlled. Boy, that solved a problem that we had. You've got jungle vegetation growing up causing all kinds of problems for the electronics. Just spray it with the stuff and it's all gone, and here we are taking a bath in it, I mean, quite literally. Your water supplies is in the middle of it. I remember the captain coming in one day and say, "Well, we don't have to mow the lawn anymore. They missed." We had beautiful grounds. We really did. And it was all dead.

HUNTER: And this is on the island?

THEBODO: This is on the island, yep. I should have brought some pictures. You wouldn't believe, you know. Once you're there, I mean, you watch the news and you see this happening here and this happening there, and it's like it's happening everywhere. Well, it's not. You don't want to be where that's happening. You don't want to be in that location. And the likelihood of it happening somewhere near you is greatly increased when you're involved. But, how I was there, we took three times, I think, we took small arms fire, and there was a sniper somewhere around. And it just went away on its own. We weren't even allowed to carry weapons. In '69 when I got there, the troop levels were at their max. And wars have rules. You're only allowed to have so many active combat troops in the area, so we had to have diplomatic passports. And we weren't allowed to carry weapons because of our status. Our orders were non-combat. And, you know, we'd kid with each other, it's like, "I wonder if these SEALS check our orders to make sure that we can be shot." [laughter] You know, it's like… I don't think that's going to happen, you know. I'm trying to think of what else.

HUNTER: Well, we can rewind just a little bit. So, you finished the boot camp and then the schooling. What was the journey like? Were you with other people that you knew? Or how were you feeling?

THEBODO: We travel alone. Coast Guard is so small, smaller than the New York Police Department in numbers. So, I went over as an individual, and that part of it was really awful, emotionally awful. When I finished school, I had 10 days leave and came home, and I couldn't relax. I mean, it wasn't… I had no idea what I was really, where I was—I knew where I was going on a map. I had no idea what it was going to be like. I traveled from Worcester. My parents, my grandparents, my sister, and I had a girlfriend at the time, all came to the airport to see me off. My dad—I've got pictures of this, and it's funny today, but, you know, my grandfather was the rock in all of this. He, you know, the slap on the back, the hug. My dad sat on his sunglasses as we're getting ready to go to the airport, and broke one of the lenses. And my dad's a man's man. And this is not a negative thing. It's just the way he was brought up. Men don't cry. Well, I gotta tell you, his eyes were all bloodshot. He's got one—he wouldn't take them off—he's got one sunglass and one without. And my mom finally made him give me your sunglasses for just one picture, so I had his sunglasses on. The whole time he's like a lost puppy.

It was hard leaving home. I mean, this is, you hop on this small airplane, and I was headed to New York to fly across the country, and then I was in Alameda, California, for two weeks in a, we'll call it quarantine. I couldn't leave the Coast Guard base before I left. So here we are right next to San Francisco and the only thing we could do is go down to the club, and I didn't drink. So, you couldn't do anything. And we're in this squad bay. You've got to see these facilities in order to appreciate just how dehumanizing some of this can be. You're in this, it's like a gymnasium with bunks four high. And, I mean, to climb up to the top one, you know, these things can tip over.

And the place was full of Coasties going anywhere and everywhere overseas, and they all had to make sure they had all the proper shots. Oh, the shots. Plague was over there. You had to have the plague shot. Yellow fever. Oh, God, I'm trying to remember. I had a shot book that it looked like a Bible, it was so thick. And they actually lost it in

between here and there, so I thought I was going to have to get a lot of these over again. And some of them will make you sick. That plague shot was awful. And then once you get over there, you've got the malaria pills. Every single week you have to take the malaria pill, and they gave you cramps, diarrhea. I handled them well. I was one of the fortunate ones. But, you know, the Corpsman would make you take it. You get in line after lunch on Mondays, and he'd make sure it went in your mouth, he put it in your mouth, you had to have a drink of water, and then you had to show him under your tongue and everything. It's a court-martial offense if you got malaria in Vietnam. They could detect the anti-malarial drugs in your system. But, if you didn't take that and you wound up with malaria, and that's the only way you could wind up with it, you were court-martialed. Same thing, you get a sunburn that takes you out, it's a court-martial offense. I'm just saying. You're in an area where this is prevalent, and they'd have something that could prevent it or reduce the likelihood, there it was. So here I am rambling on again.

HUNTER: No, that's very interesting. So you're in California, and this is still 1968?

THEBODO: This is still '69. This is May of '69. And on May 11th of 1969, they gave me my orders, and they gave me a phone number, and told me when I got to Saigon, when I got to Tan Son Nhat Air Base, "call this number." I gotta tell you, here I am in dress blues. They're all wool, with a peacoat and this Donald Duck cap that is your dress uniform. And my sea bag. That's all you take with you. That's all you own. And it was still, I hadn't switched over to trops yet, or summer uniform, so I'm in dress blues. I get on the tarmac… I remember, we landed in Alaska and we landed in Japan, and flying out of Japan we flew around Mount Fujiyama. And I had a little Brownie camera and I got some—I don't know where the pictures are today. I still have some of my pictures from that camera, but I sent them all to my mom. And I got these beautiful pictures flying around Mount Fujiyama before we headed to Vietnam.

And then the pilot announced that we're approaching the coastline. I gotta tell you, you got 200 GIs on this aircraft. Nobody knows anybody. And, you know, there were guys that were crying. And, you know, you're in this big tube. It was scary. It was eerie. And then we land at Tan Son Nhat. Now, this aircraft is air conditioned. It's fairly comfortable,

even though we're kind of hot. But they open up that door onto the tarmac, you know, you walk down a gang, and I've still got my peacoat on. Ah, it was over a hundred degrees, and humidity was unbelievable. And I've got a set of orders with a phone number. You're in the middle of nowhere, as far as you're a runway. I had no idea what to do or where to go. I was lost. This isn't like, you know, in boot camp where they come on the bus and everybody's off and you and the guy next to you. I'm all alone.

And I finally found somebody that had some idea of where I should go. So they sent me to the transient barracks, and they did have a phone. And, you know, back in those days, voice mail? It was unheard of. If somebody didn't answer the phone, nothing happened. So I tried and tried and tried, and no answer. Well, what are you gonna do? I'm in Vietnam. This isn't like, oh, I'll just go down to the YMCA and go for a dip. I don't know what time it was, but all of a sudden all these sirens started going off. I still hadn't contacted anybody from the Coast Guard. And I was out of dress blues, by the way. I'm now at least wearing a chambray shirt and dungarees, a little more comfortable. And part of Tan Son Nhat was taking rockets. I had never heard anything like this in my life. And they were on the other side of the air base. And, you know, somebody was running around yelling, "Get to the shelters!" Nobody told me where there was a shelter. And it was kind of pathetic in a way, but I'm not ashamed of it. I climbed under the bed. I mean, these are cots. They're metal spring cots with a mattress. They were beds, I mean, with pillows and sheets. So, most guys in country would consider that to be pretty good. And I'm under the cot crying. And, I mean, it seemed like this bombardment went on forever. And again, it was on the other side of the base, but I gotta tell you, you know, everything jumps. You don't know what's going on. You see the news where, you know, the VC [Viet Cong] overran such and such. I didn't smoke so I didn't even have a cigarette lighter to attack with. I mean, you know. I felt so helpless.

And I woke up there the next morning, and somebody came along, and they had contacted the Coast Guard liaison and they'd be by at a certain time. And that gets a little bit foggy. I remember the Coast Guard—somebody came along in that grey Navy style Jeep in civvies. And he's with the Coast Guard, come with him. And they brought me to the tarmac, and I think it was a DC-3, it was a cargo plane, two engines,

you know, they used for paratroopers in World War II. They land everywhere. He said, “This plane’s headed out to Con Son, and just…” You’re kidding me. He says… I mean, you’ve gotta stop, and *here you are, you’re in a war, this happened last night, this guy’s taking me to an airplane, tells me to get on, and they’re gonna fly me somewhere*. It’s like, *Oh, my God*. It was absolutely…

And the plane takes off, we’re flying over the ocean, and the next thing, we’re on the ground on this island, and it’s beautiful. I mean, the place, the last… The Japanese occupied it during World War II. There were still visible pillboxes on either side of the runway. The metal mesh that they used for an airstrip on either end was still there. The middle part of the runway was paved. And the French prison. And a lot of the French—a lot of French accents, the building that they—the building was a shade hut on the runway, was the air terminal. I get off there, and no one. I’m the only one on an island in the middle of nowhere, and there was nobody there to meet me.

But, little did I know that whenever an aircraft landed, we didn’t have any—the Coast Guard didn’t have radio communications with any of the aircraft. So, from the LORAN station you could see a plane coming in, and they always got a couple guys together to go down and check to see if there were mail or anybody… But nobody told me any of this. So here I am. They’re unloading this, that and the other, and there are all kinds of Vietnamese getting off, and that was about it. And here I am standing on this island in the middle of the South China Sea, and nobody’s there. And finally this truck comes rolling down, and, well, they had orders. They knew I was coming, but they didn’t know when. It’s one of those things. And “are you Thebodo?” “Yeah, I’m Thebodo.” “Well, come with us.” So I’m thinking, *Now we’re going someplace where they have shelter*. Because it was, it was just… It was beautiful, but boy, I’ll tell you, talk about not knowing where you are. I can’t imagine being a POW or somebody in a position where you’re not in a safe place or you’re not in a good place, because it was terrifying. Yeah, remember, I’m only 19 years old at this point. And you’re just a kid. I mean, you can’t be much older than that. And your life’s experience. I was a Boy Scout and I did this and I did that, but nothing prepares you for that. And it was nothing. I mean, you know, in all honesty, you look back on it and you

think to yourself, *Wow, that was nothing*. And yet, bang, bang, bang, I just… Yeah, it was scary, to put it mildly.

And the next day they let me get a bunk. They didn't have a place in the main barracks for me, so they put me in the First Class barracks, which was the billet that I was going to be… And I say a barracks. They had curtains. But we did have air conditioned spaces, and the only reason we had air conditioning was because the equipment required air conditioning. It had to be kept at, I think it was 65˚, so it was actually pretty cold in there. I mean, they had some of the first solid state devices installed in this electronics equipment, and it was temperature sensitive, and you could not touch these things with your hands. You had to have special gloves and you had to have special grounding. It was all micro. But this was the trigger mechanism for that, and that's why we had air conditioning, which I thank God for that little devil, you know. And everything else. I mean, this system created a tremendous amount of heat. The transmitter had tubes that the plate voltage was 21½ thousand volts on the plate. It actually created radiation. It was a radiation hazard, and they didn't find that out until the late '80s. And at 15 amps. Now, if you're familiar with electricity at all, that's what they make solid into dust out of. [laughter] Something like that makes contact, and it's not a shiver and a shake, it's a blam. That's how much power these things put out. It transmitted at 500,000 watts, and that's what we were trained to work on. So, now I'm in Vietnam. [laughter]

HUNTER: Quite a welcome. Would you mind telling me a bit about the structure of the—so you had the station and the team and who you're with and things like that?

THEBODO: Well, the billets, I think there were 26 billets all total on the station, and most of them in electronics. They had electronics and enginemen, because everything, all the electricity were generated on-site. We had these huge caterpillar generators that were the power source for everything that we had. So there were, I think, it may have been six enginemen that worked on that. A couple of electricians and one cook. Everybody else was electronics. We actually had a couple of bossenmates. And I say that. We had no requirement for bossenmates, but these two guys had been to LORAN sea school and flunked out. And the government put… it's two months' school. It's a huge

investment. If you go to a LORAN sea school, or even just "A" school, and you flunk out, you're going to give them a year of your time. So you can't make rate, you can't be promoted, so they make you what's called an electronics watch standard. It's actually not a bad job. We all had to stand electronics watches anyway. They just couldn't do any of the work on the equipment.

So, it was a very technical team. Our commanding officer was a senior ranking officer, because on LORAN stations, commanding officers… There's a progression out of the Academy that sort of puts a lieutenant JG in command of small units, LORAN stations, small boats, you know, an 82-footer. They're seaworthy. They're very seaworthy. The 95s. And that would be the progression. We had a lieutenant commander as a CO [commanding officer] because the prison had a lieutenant colonel. So, this is one of those political things where the commanding officer has to be equal to this other commanding officer. It's kind of silly. It was not at all flattering for the commanding officer on the LORAN station, he felt. And it was very clear he did not feel well. He was only there for I think a month-and-a-half while I was there, and he was replaced by a lieutenant who was an actual Academy grad. This guy was great. He was by the book, but I got to tell you, I had more respect for this guy than I think I've had for any officer before or since, just the way he treated people. He was tough, but he was fair, and you didn't have to guess what he was going to do. It was by the book.

And we had some beaches that were absolutely gorgeous. I mean, well, the embassy and this construction company would have logged flights out there on Sundays for embassy personnel and for these contractors, upper level contractors and their families to come and use the beaches. And we only had one full day off a month, and that was it. But, if you happened to have a mid-watch or an eve watch, it was still a weekend, so you didn't have to day work unless it was an emergency. So you'd go down to the beach, and that would be pretty cool. The commanding officer prior would allow cut-offs and whatnot, and this Lieutenant Scoby would not allow that. No cut-offs. And that's where he left it. He didn't say you had to wear a bathing suit. [laughter] And you probably see where this is going.

This one guy, and he had been out on the island people would say way too long, he shows up with all these civilians down there bare ass naked, [laughter] and, you know, we were all pretty well tanned. I mean, that sun was—so you'd get tan lines. So as he's walking down the beach, it looked like he had a bathing suit on, and the closer he got, and I gotta tell you, I give the—I call him the old man—I give him a lot of credit, because he didn't say a word. And when we got back, word has it that he did get into a little bit of a bind as a result of it, not to mention he got an awful sunburn.

HUNTER: Oh.

THEBODO: Yeah, in all the wrong places. And, you know, there was a little beer flowing when these events or opportunities came along. You had to be careful, because… Anyway, long story short, the following Monday at quarters it was announced that we would be allowed to wear cut-offs, but not until he had an opportunity to inspect them to make sure that they were appropriate. I mean, we were a military outfit. We weren't going to walk around looking like a bunch of rag tags. Fortunately for me, I happened to have brought out two relatively heavy duty nylon bathing suits that could be used as gym shorts, jogging shorts, whatever, and they actually lasted me the whole year. They needed some patch work before the end, but… I'm sorry, these are just stories that, you know, this is how it was and this is what it was. So, just that one example of where I consider this guy to be pretty reasonable, and even to the point where everybody knew that this guy got in trouble. Nobody knew what it was. Nobody, unless he were to blab it, and I'm sure, well, I know for a fact, you know, he was the kind of guy that "look, this is between you and I, this is how it's gonna happen. Don't say a word. This is it. You know, people have the right to know that something's been done. They do not have a right to know what it is, and that's between you and I." And nobody was ever shot. [laughter] So that was good.

But, that was, you know, that was one of the big redeeming factors on the island was those beaches. And I've got a lot of pictures of the beaches, and when we did finally… He got us boats. There was an Army listening post that came along, I'm going to say probably close to halfway through my tour, and they were there. This was top secret everything. The Army guys, they would come up and use our mess hall. We had freezers, we had food storage, we had a mess hall. I

mean, flights would come in from—C-123s. Some of these pilots would just land around breakfast time, come up and have breakfast, “yeah, we got you some mail.” We’d get milk, they’d bring us eggs. You know, they’d steal stuff for us. And then they would have their gourmet meal. I mean, we ate well, we really did. I can’t complain about that. And just hang around the air conditioning for a while. And that was worth something right there. But, I don’t know, that’s something completely different.

But, one of the guys that was assigned to the Army listening post had just been transferred there, and he got drunk, and laid down on a raft. Well, we’ve got this beautiful lagoon. But what he wasn’t aware of is that that lagoon, there’s a current that goes through there, and he fell asleep. And one of the Vietnamese came up to the station and let us know that there was somebody on a raft way out. Well, this is exactly why the CO got this boat for us. So we broke the boat out, and out we went looking for him, and the guy couldn’t swim. We never found him. We searched for, I don’t know, it was a two week total. We only looked for a couple days, in all sincerity. None of us, none of us on the station had any search and rescue training at all. I was probably the best swimmer on the station, and the only one that really had any sense, since I worked on a waterfront in my youth. So I got to go out on the boat almost every day. They switched my watches around. But I gotta tell you, you see these big white fish, they were sharks. And they are a scary looking creature when you see them like that. We found the raft, but we never found him. And they wanted us to find remains. Not that they needed him, but because of his clearance. His clearance level was so high that, and he was I guess subjected to information that was at such a high rank, they didn’t want him to fall into enemy hands, so to speak. We never found it. We never found anything. So, we just sort of summed it up that he must have tried to swim back and couldn’t. And the current out there was wicked. You could not swim against it. It’s, well, the next stop is Australia. For all intents and purposes, that’s it. You know, New Zealand, Australia. That’s where that current goes. And that was it. That’s a popular shipping lane. But, anyway, here I go again. [laughter]

HUNTER: You mentioned that there were some Vietnamese people on the island. What was your interaction with them and other people?

THEBODO: We actually had POWs working for us on the station. So, you talk about living the spoiled life. We had POWs that actually worked for us as individuals. They did the day-to-day maintenance, they worked mess cooking in the galley. They were not allowed in any of the electronics or technical spaces and engineering spaces. They were only allowed in the galley and in the barracks. But, you could hire them. And we got pretty close to them. You could hire them for two cartons of cigarettes a month. And, you know, a carton of cigarettes over there, it was a buck and a quarter ($1.25) for a carton of cigarettes. And they would do your laundry, they'd shine your shoes, they'd make your bed. And we interacted well with them.

I always—I didn't smoke. So, my rations, I'd pull out my rations and the guys that worked—I say "guys"—everybody knew that my locker was… You couldn't use money. You know, you had MPC, military payment certificates, so no greenbacks. And, so piaster, it wasn't worth anything. So, I'd just leave my locker open so any one of them could go in and out any time and have a cigarette and enjoy it. I didn't really drink, but I always had a couple beers in there, and they knew they could help themselves to that. Sometimes you'd buy clothes for them through the PX. You know, they all wore bell-bottoms—oh, they weren't really bell-bottoms, but you know, the government issue blue jeans and the chambray shirts. Those were pretty popular for the longest time. That was our uniform. We switched over to greens, I'd say probably about, I want to say around three months into our tour. We had to switch over. And we could wear either in our work spaces, but if we were out and about on the island, we had to wear the greens. And it didn't really matter. You know, you had to have your name and rank on them, and that was about… You had to be in uniform, regardless. That was the other thing that our commanding officer was insistent that you look the part. He'd graduated from the [US] Coast Guard Academy [New London, CT], and by God, you were going to look the part, and that was it.

The interaction that we had with those prisoners was pretty extensive. Every now and again, there'd be a—somebody would get into a fight, there'd be some drugs involved somewhere, and the personnel would change. We didn't really have any violent—when I say "violent"… You know, when we first got there, we'd pay them to cut our hair. And the guy did a nice job. Until I found out that this guy

murdered his family. Do you really want him cutting your hair? So there were a bunch of us that learned how to cut our own hair. And the Vietnamese were kind of upset about that, in that we wouldn't, you know, we were avoiding them. They made extra money doing that. So, I'd give him a buck every two weeks for a haircut, and just do it myself. You know, in all sincerity, regardless, I just didn't want to have—the longer I was there, the less I was interested in having somebody around my head with a razor. I just, it didn't seem to fit. And like I said, we got along good, but there were just some things that they didn't feel right, and if it doesn't feel right, let's keep it that way. So that worked out well, for me, not everybody did work out well.

I think one of the biggest issues we had over there were, it wasn't really racial, although when I first got there, there were some racial undertones that I didn't particularly care for. I grew up in the Northeast. I always considered that I had an open mind. But I never really interacted that much with… I had a friend that was black. His father was black and his mother was German. He was in the war and married a German woman. He was the offspring. We were good friends. It didn't bother me. I always thought, *Gees, I'm really open minded, you know. I'm really something*. I had no idea of what black culture was. And then all of a sudden here you are in the military interacting with people from Alabama, from Georgia, from Maine. You know, I'm just saying.

I'll just revert back to boot camp. I'm listening to all of these different accents and I'm just laughing away. And about midway through boot camp, finally a couple of the guys approached me and said, "You know, we all got together and we decided that you have the weirdest accent," because Worcester, Boston, you know, you paak yer caar, and you drink taanic. And I had it bad. And I'm thinking*, Me? I'm the only one here that talks normal*. "What are you talking about?" [laughter] "You paak yer caar any way you want." You know, the cultural blast is overwhelming. And you know what? In so many ways, it's fun. In other ways, it's disruptive.

But when I first got to the island, I didn't think anything of it initially. The cook was black, and he was First Class, and they put me in with him. The nicest guy you'd ever want to meet. Bob Nunn. Robert Nunn was his name. He was a CS-1, and he came from a time when blacks could only be stewards or cooks, and that had changed by the time I got

in, but that's where he came from. And some of the, I'm going to call them rednecks, I think they thought it was funny that they put that New England kid in with him. We got along great. And, you know, it wasn't until I finally moved out of First Class and into the regular portion of the barracks that some of the guys were telling me that—my roommate, in particular, told me, "So, how was that? Did you do all right?" "Yeah, yeah." And then, you find out that you were being spoofed to a degree. That bothered me. It bothered me a lot. And, you know, again, I can't tell you that I was Mr. Perfection, but, you know, through my religious background and through Boy Scouts, you know, being decent to other people is fundamental.

I gotta say one thing that, whenever I think about it, it chokes me up just a little bit, and I have to apologize for that. But, one of the things that happened to me just before I got on the plane, my mom took me aside. God bless moms. Mother's Day, and she said, "Bob, you gotta promise me one thing." I said, "What thing?" She says, "When you get over there, can you promise me that you will treat people with dignity? Make sure you treat them as you would want someone to treat us." It's like, *pow*. "Okay." And you're talking about a teenager, and that's what my mom wanted me to do. She wasn't going to let me go. She forbid me to do this. She forbid me to do that. And that was her request from me when I got there, is to treat people with respect.

And boy, you know, we don't. As an occupying nation, we do not treat others with respect. There are brothels on R&R [rest and recuperation]. So they try to get you to go, and "just hang out here," you know. And again, I'm not looking for the pulpit, and I'm a normal young man. But, this isn't how you treat people. This isn't how you gain respect, and have the people in an occupied nation, or just a visiting—this is in Taiwan. Or in Saigon. But you go on R&R and they tell you you can't leave this compound. "What are you talking about you can't leave the compound?" "They want you to stay in these hotels." When I went on R&R I wanted to be a tourist. I wanted to see Taiwan. I had read about it. There's all kinds of information. And they want you to stay in these little brothel type bar areas. And it's so inappropriate. And "ah, they like it." And "no, they don't." I mean, they might depend on it. It might be something that they're used to, but this isn't how we should treat others.

And I think, of all the things that warfare, and as a combatant or not… We're dealing with it today. Respect. I was an employee here at the college, you know. We're talking about being respectful to this person and to that person and to this race and that race. And they finally came out with something, and I was a supervisor, and I struggled with this, but I was exposed to it, and I was part of the exposure when I was on active duty and in the Reserve. We're not just talking about respecting women. We're not just talking about respecting blacks or Hispanics. We're talking about respecting people, you know, respect in the workplace dynamics. If I don't respect you, why in the world would you want to have any interaction with me at all? If you didn't respect me, why would I want to have a conversation? Even though I'm a motormouth. I mean, it's just, we don't do it well. And I'm not sure we're doing it well today, when you see the news, and the things that happen, and the things that continue to happen, where people in power...

Well, I gotta tell you, as an occupying nation, as an E-4 in Saigon or in Thailand—I got to travel in Thailand. I got to go to Bangkok, I got to go up to see Udorn, I got to go to Sattahip. I really, well, I raised my hand just enough times to do some really cool things. And I got used to be being there. And I got used to being that person that could fix that and make it happen. And no, I wasn't perfect. I wasn't St. Bob. But, you know, we go there and we expect people to bow to us, and we can just treat them like dirt, and that's gonna be okay because we paid them. No. People really do want dignity. I know I do. I not only want it; I expect it and I try and demand it. And, you know, in certain situations you just plain can't.

I witnessed some… In the military, I witnessed sexual harassment. I was punished for defending somebody as a result of it. And I pushed it to a point where, and this is post-Vietnam. This is when I was in the Reserve. But, this is what happened. Females, when I was on active duty, females could only be corpsmen and yeomen. Those are two ranks. So you could help the sick or take notes. I'm not trying to downgrade any of those things. But, I was in the Reserve when females were finally brought into line positions where they could do what the men are doing. "Nah, they can't handle that." I never understood that. I saw my mother become a police officer, and I thought to myself, *Nah, they can handle this*. [laughter] There might be some

physiological differences, but that would only make her meaner, so… [laughter] “So don’t mess with her.”

But, I don’t know, that is one thing about, not only Vietnam, but I think in today’s world, that we need to work a lot harder on, and that’s the respect issue, with each other and certainly where we go, the people that we interact with. And I don’t we’ll ever get there completely. It’s just human nature. But, I think it’s something that we need to be aware of. And I’m sorry, I go onto the rants again, and I wasn’t even… But, that was huge. I had a great R&R. I actually got to go to Thailand.

You know, while I was there—you get accustomed to things. You get comfortable in your own skin. You start feeling safe. If you hear gunshots somewhere, you know how to duck. [laughter] And you either have to or 365 days goes by incredibly slow. Or it may not go by at all. We had a couple of people that were stationed with us that they had to take them off the island. They did not handle it well. They went nuts, quite literally. The workload, it’s overwhelming, the workload responsibilities. I’m going to say in that timeframe, I don’t want to say I grew up because I don’t think I had yet. According to my grandson, I’m still on my way. And I hope I never totally get there for that reason. But, you know, in maturity, in maturing is, what does it mean to do your job right? Wow, “There’s no room for error.” What do you mean there’s no room for error? And when you start to understand that you’re not going to go to bed until this is right, boy, that pillow, it beckons after a while. Yeah, they’’ll bring you a sandwich over, and you’ll do this, you’ll do that, but doing it right and making sure that everything is operational and running the way it’s supposed to is huge.

We actually got a unit citation, commandant’s unit citation, for our performance rating. We were on air and in tolerance 99.9% of the time in a three month period. In LORAN? It’s unheard of. Well, it really was. And we were also told that, “Well, that’s what we expected because we give you guys spare parts.” In the Coast Guard spare parts, they are far and few between. So, we had everything that we needed to do to do the job right, but things still go wrong. And it’s hard to say… Well, I was promoted to E-4 while I was there. It was an automatic upgrade, and taking correspondence courses, and all the things that I needed to do for the next rate were fairly easy because I was already operating at an

E-6 level, and I wasn't an E-6 for pay or maturity, to put it mildly. It's amazing what you can do when that pressure's there. And the pressure isn't just internal. It's from others, when others are working as hard you are and you're part of a team that's working that way.

It was an impressive group of people that we worked with. Some of them had a superiority complex that you could see, and I don't think they did as well socially as some of us that—and I put myself in a category that sounds more favorable. Well, that's where I felt I was. But, you know, the fact that we were in a war zone made everything more intense in so many ways. The POW camp that was just on the other side of the island was formerly a French island prison colony. And if you ever get a chance to look it up, the Tiger Cages of Con Son. Have you seen it?

HUNTER: Yeah.

THEBODO: Well, you know, when you find anything about Con Son, you won't see anything about the Coast Guard or LORAN. It's all about the French. And even during the Vietnam War, the information that I've seen online about Con Son really reflects on the French occupancy, and not the Vietnamese over Vietnamese occupancy. I think they want to downplay the fact that "we did this to our own people." That's just a thought, because they did the same thing. They were called the tiger cages because of how they were treated. And we had heard about the main part of the prison, but we—in fact, I've got pictures of the prison expanding, all this new construction, and I mean, they were expecting boatloads. And they were bringing in boatloads and planeloads of POWs. I don't remember any NVA [North Vietnamese Army] being out there. Mostly political prisoners, and it seemed that they were abundant. There were a lot of political prisoners. The prisoners that worked for us were common criminals. They weren't VC. There were VC out there. But anybody that defied the government was "VC."

HUNTER: Did you have any idea what was going on inside the prison while you were on the island?

THEBODO: No. We knew of some things. I think a hair raising moment for me, and I wrote home about it, is one of those planes that came in… Now we have—when I say "now," several months into our presence there, my presence there, we got a radio

that we could communicate with aircraft with. So now we had a radio and the frequencies that we could communicate with incoming aircraft. Not all incoming aircraft would hail and speak to us. Just the way it was. But the Navy had a radar site up on top of the mountain, and they would let us know if there were incoming planes. And that was run by the US Navy. It stopped operating when the Vietnamese took it over. That was a sad… That was sad. But, that's something completely different, although I will talk about it in a little while.

We had a C-130 coming in, and the Navy let us know. So we went down to the runway to greet the plane and see if there was any mail, or "Hey, do you got anything for me?" I mean, that's basically all that it was. And you never knew if there might be somebody on the aircraft that was coming to the LORAN station. There were unexpected people showing up from time to time. The Vietnamese, the ARVN that were there, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, did not want us around, and made it very clear that they didn't even want us in eyeshot of this aircraft. And they pointed weapons at us and threatened us. It's like, you know, *Allies?* They were—we didn't always get along, and I don't mean combat-wise, We didn't have weapons. So, here we back off.

But, as they lower the thing on the aircraft, there were, I couldn't tell you how many females, and these were all wearing black. And you really needed binoculars to see what was—we didn't have any—but it was obvious from the distance that we were away that they were not in very good shape. And they all looked to be female. And later on we did hear that they had brought out a bunch of VC women that were—they had to say something, given what we had seen. But they were not treated well at all. We never saw any of them. Now, you know, it's a big prison. But, the fact that we never saw a single female down in the village, in or around the prison…

The South Vietnamese government prided themselves on the fact that they sustained themselves. They exported charcoal. They grew all their own fruits and vegetables, and we got some of the benefits from that. I mean, it was pretty cool, actually. But you'd always see prisoners out working when we went down into the village for anything. And the village, the prison, I mean, it was a huge area. And from the top of the mountain as you drive down into the village with

binoculars, you could see a lot. The tiger cages, I couldn't tell you where they were. They had to be in the old prison. But, you know, out in the fields you could see people. You never saw females. And there were a lot. Now, I'm not even going to speculate what I thought might have happened, but they didn't look like they were in very good shape when they got there. And I'm not confident that they were treated well after they arrived, because all's we were told is they were VC. VC was, they call it #10. They did not—they didn't treat their own people very well, is really what it boiled down to. And this is the government we're defending? Come on, you know. After a while, something didn't feel right about the whole thing, and the things that you saw.

President [Nguyen Van] Thieu actually had two beach, we'll call them hooches on the island, on both sides of the island, and he was there from time to time. And, in fact, that was something, a lot of BS. I think it's one of the funniest things I've ever been involved with in a scary way. We were, it was one of those Sundays that we were down there. There was an embassy flight. R&K Construction hadn't brought anything up. So you've got some high ranking embassy officials and a few drunk Coasties hanging around down at the beach. And when I say drunk, we only had beer, and that 3.2 beer, you know? So you needed 50 of them to get a buzz. [laughter] And they weren't very good. But anyway, we're playing football on the beach. And it wasn't unusual for us to interact with some of the Vietnamese that might be in or around. And they liked soccer. They didn't play football. And here we are playing football. I had no idea that the President of South Vietnam was one of the people that was in this group, and I hit him in the head with a football.

HUNTER: What?

THEBODO: Knocked him over. And, you know, I don't care if you believe me or not. I'll tell you, I thought I was in a world of shit. I had some angry people all over me, and the CO was down there, and he sort of, "Gotta get you out of here." I don't think he was hurt, but the fact is, I mean, I threw the football pretty hard. And, you know, this doesn't work. And it hit him right in the face. And it turned out it was President Thieu. And I thought, you know, I had no idea in the world. We didn't see him much after that incident. But it wasn't unusual to see him down at the beach with his entourage. You knew it was somebody that was important. He had an old Coast Guard

82-footer for his fishing boat. They caught some tuna off the island, and when they brought it back, the Coast Guard cook filleted it all up for them, and we got I don't know how much of it, but we had fresh tuna steaks as a compliment of President Thieu and his entourage. And, so that was kind of fun. But, why do feel like I'm rambling here? You know, it brings back—I keep, you know, zing, zing, zing…

I have a lot of really good memories, and I have a lot of so-so memories, as well, as you can see. But my experience in Vietnam was almost as a third person. You know, when you watch the combat movies or the news or any of these things… And I can talk about when I came home and what that was like. And for somebody coming home, it was worst case scenario. I mean, I had a chance to go to Thailand. Actually landed in Cambodia on the way to Thailand, and I, doing work with and around some of the things that I was dealing with, I was assigned a responsibility to rewrite some of the tech manual and the test procedures on the equipment for some of the work that we had done, and some of the changes that we had made. And, so I got to go to Bangkok at Coast Guard headquarters. This was the headquarters for the entire chain was in Bangkok.

So, I spent a couple days there, and from there I went up to Udorn, where they had the monitor station, and got to do some stuff up there to make those changes. I went down to Sattahip. I never got to go up to Chiang Mai, the last LORAN station near the Burmese border. That place was supposed to be gorgeous. But there was a lot of hostilities going on up there at that point in time. So they didn't want to send me up there. "No, thank you. I probably don't want to know, then." [laughter] They had had a fatality and tensions were a little high around the LORAN station. And then there was the last LORAN station that I didn't go to which was up by the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone], way up near, well, right up near the DMZ near Hue. And that was a—I always got a kick out of this—that was all in trailers. All this equipment was built in trailers and installed, and it was top secret. Now, I don't know about you, but when I see a 650-foot transmitting antenna with all the navigation lights, I don't see anything secret about that. That stands out like a sore thumb. But we always got a charge out of the fact that that was a top secret base and nobody knew it was there. You know, it's like "okay." [laughter]

HUNTER: When you were on the island, did you get sort of a sense of what was happening on the mainland or how the war was progressing?

THEBODO: No. No, not really. I do know that we were down—and some of the things that we experienced, I got there at the end of the Tet Offensive, and the anticipation of a new Tet Offensive was sort of, it felt it was imminent. So, they gave us weapons in the comm center where the live watches were. We still weren't allowed to carry or have weapons, but we had a live watch, he was allowed to carry a weapon on watch. So, we had no perimeter. We had just people. And that was that.

We were—this was an evening. I was day working, and me and my roommate went down to the front beach. And sunsets were gorgeous. I mean, being on an island in the South China Sea has its glamorous parts. I've got some beautiful photos of sunrises and sunsets, and it's beautiful. And here we are sitting on the beach having a couple beers in the evening, and all of a sudden the skyline just lit up. I mean, you know, it's I don't know, we were 50, 60, maybe even 100 miles from the coast off the Mekong. And the sky just lit up. This is, I'm thinking, *Oh, my God*. We thought it was a nuclear attack. And that was probably the scariest that I'd been because *wow, what do we do? I mean, we rely on support from everywhere. And if they're dropping nukes over there now, what's going on?* And it took us a couple of days before we were able to get any information, and it was somewhat filtered, so to speak. But, finally our CO—and we had security clearances on a need to know basis, and he did tell us that apparently an ammunition dump was blown up, and it was quite the explosion. I'm thinking, *Yeah, I guess it was*. I have no idea where it was. But, that was freaky.

Going in the city, you'd think we were winning. When I went into Saigon, it was like, I gotta tell you, businesses were thriving. The city was full of businesses, businessmen doing whatever, trading and… So, one of the scary things is now, picture walking around downtown Hanover, and the police walking around with loaded automatic weapons all the time, drunk. I gotta tell you, everybody but me, and us, you go into Saigon and everybody's walking around with weapons. It just seemed so bizarre that *something's gonna give*. And, you know it did, but nobody talked about it. And it just, it was kept from us for all intents and purposes.

We got AFVN, Armed Forces Vietnam Network radio broadcasts out on the island, but we had no TV. So, we'd pick up—we'd sit in the comm's watch, you've got one radio that operational and the other one's on standby, and you can't help yourself but flicking around the dials to see who you can pick up. You pick up some scary sounds, you know, some activity where you knew there was combat going on, and that got a little uncomfortable.

We picked up—we had AM radios, 1000 watt AM radios with sidebands. And one night my roommate and I were on watch together, and we picked up the Oakland operator, the Oakland, California, overseas operator running a test pattern. And on sideband, it comes across, sounds like, you know, Star Wars talk, [makes garbled noises], you know, it's all over the place. Well, that's the down side of sideband. The upside of sideband is we're halfway around the world, and we're picking this signal up. And we looked at each other and said, "You want to give it a try?" So, we get on the radio and we're trying to break into the—it's a recording, and we knew that. All of a sudden a human voice comes on, you know, "Who's this?" And we gave him our call sign and told him who we were. I don't think they believed us. And we had a conversation that was sort of all over the place, you know, it goes high and low and all over. But we're having this conversation, and finally I said, "Look, we are in the middle of Vietnam. Is there any chance that you could call collect, so I could talk to my parents." I mean, it's a telephone operator. "No, we can't do that." I was like, "Come on. You've gotta be able to do that. No, really." And they wouldn't do it. And they were apologetic about it.

But, when Christmas—I was in Thailand at Christmas. My parents had no idea where I was. And the captain, the district commander, asked anybody if they wanted to make a phone call home, and which what you had to do is you had to go down to the telephone building and hook in. You know, it was one of those like lineman phones. So that's what I did. And I called my mom and dad on, it was Christmas Eve in Bangkok. And boy, I tell you, they were scared. This is long before scam calls and all those other things, but they'd just moved into a new house and they were having, it was actually two days before Christmas. It was the 23rd there. And "what are you doing?" And I was like "I'm in Thailand." "Thailand, where's that?" "Bangkok, Thailand. It's right near

Vietnam, but it's not." "What are you doing there?" I said, "You're not gonna believe it. I'll tell you." You know, I wrote letters every day. It was one of the things that you could do. And they'd get them two weeks later sometimes, sometimes not. But, I did get to call my family. I mean, you see today, I mean, with satellite phones and computers, you know, Facetime with family and friends. That didn't happen.

Guys that were married, you know, they could go to R&R in Hawaii or something like that to visit family, but you were gone for a year. My grandmother died right around Thanksgiving, and I got a—the CO came and he said, "I've got some tough news for you." And I was close with all of my grandparents, and it was my dad's mom. He says, "You know, I'll read it." And it was a flash message from the Red Cross, and the first thing it starts off, it says, "You will not be allowed leave," and blah, blah, blah, and "we're sorry for your loss" and all this. I wish I had kept it. I didn't keep it. I couldn't get rid of it fast enough. I was so upset. There was nothing you could do, absolutely nothing. And even to the point where, you know, I had a watch that night, and the captain said, "I can't even give you time off." I mean, I knew that. I mean, it wasn't like a shock or… But, gees, I lost my grandmother and there was absolutely nothing I could do or say. I couldn't give a quick phone call. I didn't even have time to sit down and write a "Dad, I'm sorry" letter. That was hard. But, you know, that's not just Vietnam. That's military service anywhere around the world at that time. You couldn't do it. You couldn't get there. You know, you couldn't get emergency leave, especially that far away and in those circumstances. It wasn't available. So, things like that. You know, I'm gonna say they're life changing events. They are and they aren't. It's part of life. It's what life is.

But, you know, then I got to be the tower inspector, 650-foot transmitting antenna, and if you're afraid of heights, that's no place to be, but what a view. And you climb in this tower and the first thing you start thinking about is, *You know that sniper that was out there the other day?* [laughter] It's like, man, you're a dot on this huge tower.

HUNTER: Can you explain a little bit more about the sniper incident? You mentioned it before.

THEBODO: Well, the first time it happened… Every day at noontime we had quarters. Everybody had to be there unless you were

actively on watch. If you were actively on watch, you obviously couldn't be there, and you were accounted for and whatnot. But you had to be in uniform, the uniform of the day, which was generally a work uniform. And the plan of the day was announced, the meal of the day was announced, you know, everything. This was a regular activity. Then all of a sudden this chunk of—the barracks were all like that, they were concrete prefab, concrete with flat roofs—this chunk of concrete flew off the building. It's like, *What the hell?* And then, you know, just a second or so later you hear this crack off in the distance. And I don't know who it was. You all take cover, and it didn't take anybody any time at all to get into the building. And that was one shot one time that time.

Another time, it happened to me going from the what we called the crews' quarters, mess hall area across to the buildings where all the equipment was, the technical supplies and the generators, the LORAN systems, you know, operations building. We were walking across and then all of a sudden you could hear something snapping off in the distance, and you could hear stuff, but not see it. And we knew somebody was taking shots at us. And it had to be, you know, we're right at the bottom of a range of small mountains. I mean, you've got to stop and think, these islands, there were several islands in this chain, but they're just like a mountain range that just pops right out of the ocean, part of a tectonic plate. One of them was obviously an extinct volcano. It was pretty cool. I mean, it really was. I mean, you'd get to see this thing.

Towards the end of my tour, the last two weeks of my tour were unexpected. My orders were cancelled because of the invasion, when they invaded Cambodia. I was scheduled to go home on May 1st, and me and another guy, and you had to take the flight out to the island to get to the mainland to catch the flight home. And the CO was, and pretty early in the morning, he says, "Ah, I've got some tough news for you." *Yeah, right*, you know. He said, "All your orders have been cancelled. *Yeah, good one*, you know. [laughter] May 1st, that's you're a month late. He said, "No." He handed me a copy of the orders, or the flash message, and "Due to combat…" Or I can't remember exactly what it said, but there was some foul language exchanged. [laughter] It's like, *Oh, man*. I was packed and ready to go, everything. And now I can't go home. I was really bummed. And I was kind of scared, too. "Well, technically, as of the end of today, I'm not

attached to this unit anymore. What are you gonna do with me?" That didn't turn out to be an issue at all. I mean, the captain was like, "Oh, yeah, bullshit on that. Don't worry. I'm in control." So, that went good. So, he gave me choice of duty, and I took mid-watch. That gave me the whole day off, and I didn't have to do—I say I didn't have to do any day work, but I did some. But, my duties went downhill dramatically because of that.

And those boats I told you about that we had? We got to travel out and explore some of these outer islands, and with the blessing of the CO. And, boy, I'll tell you, one of them, there was a French lighthouse that was manned by a Vietnamese family, this thing you had to climb the—I don't know how they got supplies out there. I mean, we moored the boat on rocks, swam ashore, and climbed up this rock face to get up to this lighthouse. And they had a beautiful little spot, still lit with oil, and a live navigation light. And that was pretty cool. And then, like I said, the volcano.

And then, you know, here we are trying to get back in some rough seas. It's like, *Oh, no, this wouldn't be good*. But that's just, you know, just to add to your tan at this point in time, a little glory tan, you know. I was as blond and as black as you could possible get by the time I came home. Never used a stitch of sunscreen. You know, nobody—that was never a concern. Sunburn was. If you got a sunburn, and I got a pretty bad sunburn when I first got there, but once I tanned up, I darken up and my pigmentation holds well. So, like a surf boy [laughter] when I came home.

But, that was the other thing. When we finally did catch the flight home, it was on May 11th, it turned out to be exactly one year from when I got there. And so, May 11 to May 11. You know, days stick in your mind. Some dates are always there. And May 11th, even though it wasn't even Mother's Day that day, it will always be Mother's Day, because my mother said she put it off until I got home. There would not be a Mother's Day until I got there. And, you know, moms are special, they really are.

HUNTER: Moms are special.

THEBODO: Yeah, they really are. And my wife's a mom, and I gotta tell you, my boys are damned lucky it's not just me [laughter] or it would have been just me. But, I've gotta tell you, that trip

home, boy, we got into Tan Son Nhat, me and another guy now, we're leaving on the same day. He got there after I did. But, we get there. Now, in order to get to the flight, you couldn't travel the flight line. You had to leave Tan Son Nhat Air Base and go around the city in order to get to the civilian air terminal where we were leaving from. They were chartered jets, and that's how we left.

Now, in that timeframe, the invasion of Cambodia had already happened. Kent State had just happened. They were rioting in the streets of Saigon and they let us out. After we stepped outside the gate, I was, well, I guess I wasn't totally amazed, because part of our orders, and this was really unusual, they were an amendment to our orders that we were allowed to travel all the way to the continental United States in jungle greens. Yeah, right, I mean, I couldn't wait to pull my whites on. I mean, you know, all the new medals and all this shit. Well, you know, there was a certain amount of pride that I had in a year of being somewhere else. And I was proud of… I didn't feel ashamed. I didn't feel like I had anything to hide. And yet, once we left the gates, oh, man, I'll tell you, it got really rough. The—we called them the white mice, the Saigon police, they were teargassing these crowds. We were in the crowds. We got teargassed. And it was nasty. You know, we had plans. We were gonna do this, we were gonna do that, before we had to be over to the terminal. We decided to get right over to the terminal. And I didn't drink, but we got a bottle of—I can't remember what we got a bottle of.

But, we went through the customs. And customs, those guys were a bunch of assholes. They were—a lot of guys were smuggling drugs back, and that was… But they weren't looking for drugs. They were looking for weapons. If they found drugs, they took them and kept them. They had an amnesty box you could put anything in before you walked in, and they had several guys… I didn't wind up getting strip searched, but it was humiliating. I mean, you know, take him behind a curtain or something. But, you know, it was all men. But it doesn't matter. When you're being treated with no dignity, that's the way it was. And this is now we're headed home. I think me and my buddy, I think the only reason that we didn't get searched any more than we did was because we stunk of teargas. [laughter] But, I mean, that stuff, I don't know if you've ever experienced teargas.

HUNTER: Luckily not.

THEBODO: It is nasty. And we had… Well, anyway, this was exposure due to real life. This wasn't training. And I wasn't ready for it. They took—in my baggage I had a spare pair of boots. I loved those jungle boots. They were the most comfortable footwear I think I've ever had in my life. They took them. I had a brand new jungle hat with the mosquito mesh. I'm thinking, *Camping, man, this thing is gonna be great*. They took that and I said, "What are you taking that for?" "Just shut up and sit down." My spare shirts, they took those. It's like, you know… they were stealing stuff from people. I wasn't the only one. They were stealing stuff from people. I don't believe they found any weapons on anyone. And that was the real issue at that time was smuggling weapons back.

Drugs, you know, people were sneaking marijuana to and from. And it was a big problem over there. I'm going to say marijuana, you can say what you will, it was a problem. You don't have active duty personnel all screwed up and functioning in a normal manner. But, the real—and again, I was a kid. I wasn't exposed to a lot of this stuff in real life, and what little I saw of drug use. Acid? We had a couple of guys on the station, one of them wound up they had to send him home. He was tripping. I mean, you can't work with this kind of equipment and think that God is there. 'Cause he may show up. I'm just saying. These are the kinds of things that the war did to people. You know, you see guys smoking dope through gun barrels. I know, you see the movie, *Platoon*. They really did that shit. I mean, that sucks. These Thai troops had a mortar that they turned into a bong. And again, you're talking about some hick kid from Leicester, Massachusetts, "What the hell is that?" And, you know, you end up trying these things, and I'm thinking, *Oh, man, I'm in the wrong place. I shouldn't be here. And my mom's a police officer. Oh, this is gonna go over well*. You know, "Yeah, Mom, I'm doing drugs now." And if you get track marks, "I got a twig caught in my arm." [laughter] You know, all the things that wind up happening.

But, then we finally get on the plane. I gotta tell you, there was no feeling like it when that plane lifted off. And we stopped. We had to go through customs again. In Japan we were fine. Japan, we got to play touristy. But it was all fogged in, so you couldn't. And it was late. But, when we left

Japan, you got to go to the exchange and get some of the things you couldn't get before. Got a Tripler for my camera. I was all excited, you know. I was ready to go. We got to Alaska. Now we're technically in the United States. We had to go through customs all over again. And it was like, *you gotta be kidding me*. I mean, they were much better than at Tan Son Nhat. That was terrible.

Then, we land in San Francisco. We were going to go to Disneyland. Well, I had two months' leave coming, and me and this other guy, that was our plan from the very start when we got to California. My parents had no idea when I was coming home. "Well, we'll go to Disneyland. We're free. We're human. We have money." You know, we'd been saving for a whole year. We got a raise. It's all tax free.

By the time we got to San Francisco, it was nasty there. At Travis [Air Force Base, CA], there were protestors outside the gate. It was like they were just waiting for us. There was no Coast Guard liaison, so what we were supposed to do, when you got home, when you got to Travis, you were supposed to go to the Navy, and they were supposed to punch your orders. Just a time stamp. And that's when your leave starts. I went to the Navy liaison and I got in line, and he says, "What are you doing here?" I said, "Well, you have to stamp my orders." "We don't do Coast Guard." I was like, "Really? I was told to report to the Navy liaison. It says so right here." "Well, we're not doing your orders." And just absolutely rude and nasty. Some of the interservice rivalries sucked. I don't understand it but, you know, "brothers in arms," *no you're not*. It didn't feel that way. Well, I thought, *Gees, I've gotta get these stamped*. So I went over to the Marine liaison was right next door, and I went to him, and he just laughed at me. He said… I can't remember the remarks he made, but regardless... And I finally said, "Bullshit on this. I'm going home. I don't care if somebody punches my… I've just been in Vietnam for a whole year. I don't need this crap."

So, we get on the plane. He's going somewhere else. I think he lived in Kansas. And I'm going to Boston. I had a non-stop flight, get on the plane, and just, you know, I'm flying military standby, they pay you for your flight and everything, get on the plane. I got a wing seat, and I'm sitting there watching this engine smoke, thinking, *Heck. I've been on a lot of planes this past year and I never saw anything like this*. The plane starts to taxi out, and gets into the takeoff

position, and boy, the smoke is pouring out of this engine, and I'm thinking, *Hey, there's something that isn't right*. And finally they shut it down. It's a four engine jet. It's like a 707. I think it was a Corvette 880 or something like that. They shut it down, we exit the plane out on the runway, and they bring us back. The plane caught on fire. The engine caught on fire

HUNTER: Oh, goodness.

THEBODO: So, they lead us back. The good news is, by now, you know, 24 hours since I left… I left Saigon at I think it was 5:00 a.m. on May 12th, and arrived in the United States, it's May 11th now. It's kind of cool. So they put us into the passenger lounge. They fed us. We got drinks. Then they gave us First Class accommodations. And I gotta tell you, I slept, I think, most of the way across the country. We landed in Denver, and then went on to—I told my parents what time I'd be home, what time the first flight, and never got near a phone. We didn't have cell phones back then, and you get on a pay phone. You know, it was impossible to get to a pay phone at that point in time, and there were no complementary phones or anything.

So, by the time, non-stop from Denver all the way to Boston, and when we got there, I've gotta tell you, I've never seen anything like it, you know? I came out. I had changed into whites now, my whites, and they were a mess. [laughter] They really were. But, I gotta tell you. My dad, he's just a little guy, and the chairs in the terminal, he looked like a track star. He jumped over both of the sets of chairs. He didn't go around them. He jumped right over them. And I gotta tell you, it was a hug to die for. And there's nothing like it in the world. I can't describe it. It was… Well, you know, I can't say, unlike so many veterans who came home from Vietnam with horror stories, and I guess everybody has a little of PTSD in everyday living, just for that sake. But, I was blessed in that I didn't wind up in that position. But, wow, what a feeling to be home like that.

And then, of course, you know, the ride from Boston. And my poor parents, they didn't know how to drive in the city at all. We finally got to Leicester, and my poor dad. He's there right, "You never smoked any of that marijuana, did you?" Well, unfortunately, you know, I was ultimately honest and I said, "Yeah, I did, dad." "Oh. Well, you didn't like it, did you?" "Oh, no. No. Dad, believe me." And of course, this is before

all the drug testing and whatnot. So, I didn't know what to think, you know.

But, getting home, the sad part was the Memorial Day parade, which was just a week-and-a-half away. You didn't want to wear a uniform. Back when I was a kid, every veteran that ever lived wore their uniform that didn't even come close to fitting anymore to the Memorial Day parade. And, given the tensions and the people flying the flags upside down, it was really upsetting. It was awful. And, you know what? This is what we defend is your right to make a statement. I consider it disrespectful, but you have a right to do it. And as long as you can look at it that way, you're not in a fistfight. There were so many guys that I know that wound up in fistfights and bar fights, whatever, because of protesters or somebody making some snide remark. You know, the entire time that I was stationed in Alexandria, Virginia, the protesting went absolutely bizarre at that point in time. It got to be uncomfortable. And I wanted to be a civilian then. It was like, gees, everybody… you could tell that you were in the service and that you were active duty just from your haircut. I mean, you could tell it a mile away. Everybody had long hair, ponytails. I really wanted to have some long hair. I obviously didn't stick. [laughter] But, you know, you were different, and that made it hard.

But you know, my Vietnam experience did several things for me. Number one, I had a chance to see part of the world that I never would have seen. I had a chance to experience some things that I never would have experienced. I saw some things that I guess I'd rather not have seen them, but I know it's real. You know, like people talk about the Holocaust, and is it real or is it not real? People that were there know. Not that I'd want to ever compare anything that I had to something like that, but I know this thing was real. I know what went on. I have a sense of what went on.

Did we know what the progress of the war was? Absolutely not. The press was so… You know where I found out more information? As being in Vietnam, my mom called the Worcester—I worked at the Sunday *Telegram* for a while, and my dad wound up working part-time there, too, late night delivering papers to where the paperboys were and the drop-offs, from the printer to the street. I did that for a while. So the Worcester *Telegram* sent me free newspapers. So, about once a month I'd get 50 *Telegram's* and *Gazette's*.

[laughter] So I'd get them all at once. But, that's where you really found out what was going on in Vietnam, or had a sense. Other than that, they wouldn't tell you anything.

AFBN, boy, the news was—there was no news. The Superbowl, you found out about that. Maybe some, you know, how the Yankees were doing or the Dodgers or something like that. But, the news was, I'm going to call it a joke. I had no idea what was going on. I knew that they had invaded Cambodia, but I didn't know about Kent State. I didn't know that all the colleges were going on strike and that we were walking into a, I'm going to call it a trap. I mean, that's what I felt like when we got home. We really walked into a trap, and we were blindsided. And that part of it was, you know, I can use terms like "awful." There are no holes, no scars, I'm mentally fine. But, boy, I'll tell you, we were blindsided by that, and somebody should have said something, that "don't expect…" other than the fact that "you don't want to walk out of that gate. You're gonna want to take the bus." Okay, you're on American soil. I don't care where you are in the world. That felt good. It just felt good. You were home. And it made a difference. And to be on the East Coast, back in your hometown, there was nothing like it. Nothing like it at all.

But, you know, I got the GI Bill. I took full advantage of it. I went to college four years, got my degree. Wound up, as a result of that, I worked here. I got the job here. I'm serious. I was still in college when I interviewed for the arbor's position here at the college. And Dick Plummer, there's a tree, Baker[-Berry] Library on the back side, it's a relatively small tree with a plaque commemorating Richard W. Plummer ['54]. He hired me as the college arborist. And boy, what a lucky break that was. Well, it really was. You know, what really interests me about the thoughts of this project wasn't so much, *Gees, do I have a lot to offer?* But it's done so much for me. I've used it. You know, every veteran has had the opportunity to do this, that and the other. Not every veteran has taken advantage of it. As a Vietnam veteran, I went to college for free. I had the old GI Bill, but U Mass [University of Massachusetts] offered Vietnam veterans tuition waivers. In-state tuition, it wasn't that expensive, but I went to college for free. I am not the brightest lightbulb in the chandelier, and yet, I did it, I'm proud of it. I'm proud of that.

I wound up spending another 26 years in the Coast Guard Reserve. So I always kid about the fact that I was just too lazy to get out. We needed the money, and I could do it. I was good at it. And my God, I spent seven years recruiting. And I gotta tell you, as a recruiter they really liked seeing all the medals. Well, I'm serious. You know, all of a sudden, I'd say, just before the Iraq War, somebody caught onto the idea that all that fruit salad looks good, and it excites kids. And that was one of the things that we talked about in one of our recruiting sessions. And I was used as an example. But, I only had three rows, and none of them—they all meant something to me, but it wasn't like I gave my life for any of them. And I called one of them "perfect attendance in boot camp," "stayed in Vietnam without going home once in the year"… You know, it's like, call it what you will. But they all meant something. They all had a significance. And some of them meant more than others. But, as a recruiting tool, they considered that fruit salad to be… You know, you see these Marine generals on TV. My God, how do they walk? It's like my God, that's unbelievable. And when they turn them all into medals, my God, it's got to weigh a ton. And to decorate your uniform like that, it takes hours to do. People don't realize that… I shouldn't sound like I complain. You know, you signed up, you know what you're getting into. Getting your uniform ready for an inspection shouldn't be one of the things that you die for. It's as annoying as hell, but it's the reality of what you are.

But, four years of college. The VA took away our medical benefits, so to speak, and made it so that you have to be in poverty to use the VA, unless you're a disabled veteran. And today, I don't know, does it ever end for some people? And this is the part that I think… The Vietnam War, I was a part of it. I'm not bleeding because of it. I'm convinced that, you know, I deal with cancer and I believe that's part of it. I believe it's a direct result of exposure to everything that I was exposed to in Vietnam. I could have been exposed to the same thing in another location, given what it is and how it was used. But, the exposure to Agent Orange, yeah, we took a bath in that stuff. It just can't be good for you. Anything that kill that much vegetation that fast, and cause all these bubbles and blisters on your body, that can't be a good thing. And "don't worry about it. It's happening to everybody." That was the general consensus at the 3rd Field Army Hospital that they sent me to in Saigon, is "don't worry about. It's happening to everybody." Oh, well, that makes it all right.

But, you know, when you're talking about guys that are dealing with gunshot wounds, blast wounds, body parts missing. I had blisters on my back. Well, how bad do you feel for this guy?

But these are long… You know, I guess in some ways things never end. For every action, there's a reaction. And part of that, I gotta tell you, my exposure to chemicals in Vietnam—I was responsible for applying pesticides on the Dartmouth campus, and when we were told that we couldn't use anything because of a student who was chemically sensitive, I jumped all over it. Football team wasn't happy, soccer team wasn't happy, a lot of people weren't happy with the end result of that after just a couple of years because weeds were growing in the grass. You can't play football over the weeds. And I'm being a little facetious here, but I gotta tell you, when you stop and think of what we're exposing ourselves to and how we're exposing it, if the Vietnam War didn't teach us something, then we've wasted a lot of time.

And, you know what? We're still fighting wars. We're talking the big drumbeat right now with North Korea and Syria and, well, you know what? We're not being blasted, so it's somewhere else, so we're okay. Well, there's part of me that agrees with that, but there's also a part of me that knows there's somebody over there that is doing, maybe not what I did, but in similar circumstances. Even if they're not in combat, you're being exposed to this. And they're seeing what's going on, and basically helpless except that they're individuals that maybe they can make a difference by being tolerant, by accepting the fact that you might have a different religion than I have, or maybe you don't have a religion at all. Maybe you're racially different, theoretically different. You know, differences. How do we accept them? How do we tolerate them? How do we become them? I mean, let's face it. I was told in boot camp that I was the one that was different. [laughter] And *wow, me? You know, I'm from Worcester. How can that be, you know?* So, I don't know. I'm just babbling here, and I don't intend to.

But, no, the Vietnam War was, it was a terrible thing, in that World War II veterans were welcomed home as heroes. Vietnam, I mean, regardless of your duty, if you were a Vietnam era veteran, you were exposed to this intolerance of the war. And I gotta tell you, the intolerance of the war was a good thing, in my mind. But, we treated the veterans in a

way that was inappropriate versus the war. And I gotta tell you, when I got to U Mass, there was a whole department was just for veterans. And I was a Vietnam veteran. I still had the haircut because I was still in the Reserve. People knew it, especially the vets. You get to talking, and "yeah, I was in Vietnam." "What'd you do?" "I was a LORAN tech, Coast Guard." Oh, man, you know. If you're talking with somebody that's a combat veteran, you're not a Vietnam veteran, and it's cut and dry. And you've got to understand why. I mean, it's one of those things that you're in a category. You're not in that same category, and I would never… Boy, the last thing I'd want to do is to fake the fact that, *yeah, I saw the worst of the wars. And I cut my finger once*. You know, that's not the case at all.

So, here I was. I was exposed. I got to see. I was there. I was a part of it. Our system, we were briefed by an Air Force general, a one-star general, who came to the station for an all hands, and he explained to us what our system was, and what it was doing. And at the time we were told that "this is top secret." Maybe it still is and I'm just babbling on. But, we were told that this system was a navigation system that allowed our forces to possibly pinpoint bomb. And if I'm not mistaken, he did refer to the idea that at 30,000 feet, you may drop a payload within plus or minus a foot per 1,000 miles, but as it falls 33,000 feet, it could be three football fields off from that. So, given those things, that's where it becomes even more important that we are on air and accurate at all times, because we never know exactly when that system is in maximum use. And if we go off by a little bit, the system blinks and throws everything off, and it could be somebody's life; it could be many lives. And that was the kind of briefing that we got from this Air Force general. We were funded by the Air Force. That's why we had spare parts. I mean, that made our LORAN system different from other LORAN systems.

HUNTER: Was it strange to come back and, as you say, experience this backlash? You then spent so much time on college campuses, and especially—I'm not as much of an expert on U Mass, Amherst, but Dartmouth I know had a lot of protests and anti-war movements.

THEBODO: By the time I came here, the Vietnam War—I came here in '76. The Vietnam War ended in '75. It was sort of behind us at that point in time. Dartmouth was dealing with coed,

coeducation, racial issues. Those were the kingpins of protests and issues at that time. I was able to focus on elm trees. I'm serious. That was my passion. That's what I did. And I was able to bury myself in that for a while. And again, I stayed in the Ready Reserve, and it was pleasant for a short time. The person that took it the hardest was my wife. You know, I wasn't married when I was in Vietnam. I know guys that were. I don't think their marriages lasted, for all kinds of stupid reasons, and I call them stupid because socially they didn't play the game right. And I call it a game because that's what they were doing. They were playing a game. They didn't respect their wives enough to be decent to others. I'm just saying. That's my opinion.

Am I a strong person? I don't know. I try. How strong am I? Well, the older I get, the better I was. [laughter] So, with that being said… Boy, I was a great baseball player. There was that time I caught the ball, you know? That sticks out in my mind, unlike all the errors I made, you know. So, it's easy to look back and remember your good points. It may not be so easy to go back and admit your bad points, and why would you really want to do that? But what do we learn from any of this?

So, I come to Dartmouth College from U Mass, and I've got a whole new world ahead of me. And that's what it was. Now, I'll be honest. When I came up here for my very first interview, Dick Plummer, the director of buildings and grounds, I had a head start advantage. Being a veteran, and working part-time as a bartender at the VFW, I ran into all these guys that worked at the Shade Tree Lab at U Mass, and they were doing all these projects with elm trees. And I wrote two papers during my last two years at U Mass about Dutch elm disease. The only pertinent question Dick Plummer asked me when I came for my interview was, "What do you know about Dutch elm disease?" Rolled a lucky seven! [laughter] I'm serious. I felt like I had written a book, and I was the author. I don't want to make it sound better than it was, but it was that good.

We drove into town. I came into town with my wife. Our car broke down on the way up. We're college students coming for a job interview. And I'd never been to Dartmouth before. I'd hiked the White Mountains. Been by it, but never through it. Always on the other side of the river or on the other side of the mountains, but I never went directly through the campus.

So as I'm driving up Wheelock Street, I'm like "Oh, my God, look at these elms. Oh, gees, wait till the guys at the Shade Tree Lab hear about this. This is unbelievable." I had heard a rumor that Dartmouth had elms, but I never expected to see what I saw. I mean, this place was a lot different when I arrived here in '76 than it is now. And I've been responsible for removing, I'm going to say probably close to 300 trees, major elm trees from the general center of the campus. I'm not saying that as a… All things die. And a big part of controlling Dutch elm disease is to remove the infection source. So, when it became obvious that this tree was no longer going to survive, and there wasn't anything else you could do, remove it. Fighting with people, arguing this, arguing that, but bottom line, it's the right thing to do, and that's what we did.

But, when Dick Plummer says, "What do you know about Dutch elm disease?" Well, okay. *And in the beginning, there was life*. [laughter] I got a chance to come back for a second interview, but Dick warned me that he felt, towards the end of the interview he told me, he says, "Look, I consider you to be a very strong candidate." And I said, "Oh, great." He says, "But I want you to know something. There's a young lady who has applied for the job, and if she is so inclined, I have to consider her to be a strong favorite." I said, "Why?" "Well, you know, affirmative action and whatnot." And I don't mean to throw anything around with this, because I think there's a reason and a goal in all of these things. But I started to get angry. And I said, "Look, that's fine. But, I just want you to know, and it should be in there." I told him, I said, "I'm a Vietnam veteran, and regardless of what you think about Vietnam or Vietnam veterans, I think that at least entitles me to a fair shake. So, if we're even, then let us be even, and then we can start talking about tiebreakers. But, you know, she shouldn't have the advantage just because she's a female." And I hope you don't take any of this to be negative. I think there are reasons why veterans have this advantage. There are points given for minorities to make up for past wrongs. And I guess that's good, but not when it comes to taking my chance away. Do you know what I mean? And he said to me, "Well, calm down." He said, "First of all," he said, "I want you to know, my gig was Korea. I'm a Korean veteran and I was in the Marine Corps. So I know what you're trying to tell me. You'll get a fair shake." And I said, "Well, that's all I can ask for." And I apologized.

And then I came up for the second interview, and I got the job. So I spent the next 35 years of my adult life working here on the Dartmouth campus. Bumped into some of the guys that… I was the college arborist for the first 13 years here, and then I took over as the grounds supervisor, managing people. Trees are a lot easier to deal with. [laughter] But I gotta tell you, I went to U Mass. I spent my time in the Coast Guard, and I'm very proud of that. I really am. But 35 years here, I guess when I saw this, I thought, you know, *Regardless of what I have to offer, I should at least offer it*. I know I talk too much and I ram on, but, you know, there are so many stories that can be told.

And President [James E.] Wright, you look at some of the things that he's done in recent years since his retirement, and it's heartwarming. I mean, I'm really enthralled with the man. In fact, I have a personal letter on my wall. And in '95, President [William J. "Bill"] Clinton came to Dartmouth College. And I gotta tell you, that was one of the most difficult commencements I think I've ever been involved with. I know it is, without question. The only tractor we had to work Memorial field blew the turbocharger the first day we started working on the field, right in front of where this whole event was supposed to happen. We had hazardous cleanup that we had to deal with, had a tractor that needed major repair. Blackmount Equipment up in Haverhill, New Hampshire, repaired it overnight, in the rain under a tarp.

And then, you know, the requests that came in, one right after the other. They wanted 12-foot high hemlocks. You couldn't get hemlocks back then. And I wound up—I can't remember the lady's name. She was one of the head honchos of this particular commencement. I mean, this was quite the choreography that they put on for this thing. And I brought her over to Northern Nurseries where they have what I consider the best supply of trees. They were rolling a tractor trailer load of hemlock, 20-foot tall hemlock, that they weren't expecting. I bought them all right then and there. So, here you're pulling off things that you're telling people you can't do, and you're doing it anyway. That was unbelievable. A lot of those hemlocks are planted now down on the Memorial field down on the back side. They're big trees now. And some of them are planted in the president's front… They're scattered around. But we used them all for different things. After that the hard part was finding flower pots big enough to put all of these things in so that they'd be on the

stage for a nice green backdrop. I had a green cloth. “No, we want real trees.”

So, after that commencement—it poured the entire time—Jim Wright sent me a personal note thanking me. And you know, it was something that, boy, I really need to share that with the entire crew. But the fact that he’s addressed it to me, and the personality it was sent in, I just couldn’t throw it out there to the guys. I just wanted them to know that President Wright was really pleased, but I couldn’t read that letter the way it was written. But I framed it and put it on my—it’s on my living room wall. I gotta tell you, it’s one of those things that it won’t matter to anybody else in the world, but he was acting president, because James [O.] Freedman was president at the time, and Jim Wright was acting president when Bill Clinton—[laughter] whatever that guy’s name was—came here to the college. But, the note was about how driving around and looking at the beautiful campus, the trees and the lawns, and he thought of me and how it was, you know, take it so serious. I mean, this kind of language, I’m going, *Ah, he can’t be talking about me* [laughter]. But, bottom line, it’s things like that, and things like a commandant’s commendation, and I don’t know, a good conduct medal.

And in my course of all those years on active duty, I was actually involved in two lifesaving events, 30 years. And I mean, here you call it, it used to be the “lifesaving service.” But, those two times probably stand out as much. I know I didn’t talk about them at all. They had nothing to do with the Vietnam experience. But then again, they have everything to do with it. You know, a young kid tried to commit suicide on base on a Sunday night, and I found him in the head. He had slashed his wrists with a letter opener. If you’ve ever seen a government letter opener, I can’t imagine trying to cut anything with one of those things, and he had slashed his wrists. And all over his girlfriend broke up with him. He was in the Presidential Honor Guard. We were stationed in the same facility as the Honor Guard, the engineering laboratory and the radio station. All Coast Guard being funded the way it is, everybody’s in the same barracks. And this kid’s in the Honor Guard. And I literally saved his life. And to say you’re proud, I mean, it’s one of those things. Why wouldn’t you do something?

The other life? I gotta tell you, out of the blue at the beginning of the Iraqi War, I was drilling—I wasn't recruiting anymore—I was drilling out at Gloucester [MA], the lifeboat station, and there wasn't a lot for us to do, and I had already, even though I wasn't qualified as a boat crew member, I had already more or less established myself with the boat crews that getting underway wasn't beyond my zone of reality. So, without much to do… I don't know how to run radar. I've worked on it, but I don't know how to operate it. They're going out, and this is in late November, so the water's cold, on a training run for one of the bossens. And what they do is it's a radar run. It's during the day, but they put a blanket over him, and all's he does is he steers the boat by radar. And we're going through the channels and whatnot, and it was pretty cool.

Well, we were just starting to come back to the station where off in the distance over in Marblehead, there was a guy. Now, the weather was, it was kicking up, November in New England off the coast, and he was rowing a dinghy without a life jacket, dressed up in a big down jacket, rowing a dinghy out to secure his yacht. And, you know, I thought I saw something strange. And, so I grabbed the binoculars. This guy flipped over. Well, he was going under. So, and if we hadn't been there… We raced over, I'm going to say probably a quarter of a mile away. I mean, we're quite a ways off. And we get over there, and this guy is struggling for his life now. He can't… This thing is bogging him down and the water is freezing, so he's dealing with hypothermia. And we pulled him up and got him on board the lifeboat, and got him down below, warm blankets and whatnot. He was a dead man if we hadn't been there. And we're out there for just that reason. And the only reason I'm on board was to observe the radar operations. So, really, I was just going for a ride, for all intents. And if I hadn't been on board, I don't know if anybody else would have seen it. I was standing outside. Everybody else was inside. And I just saw it.

And I'm sorry. Here's where I ramble on. But, you know, it's something you'll never see anywhere. But, you know, you've got it in here that there's somebody out there that they don't know who you are, or who we are, and he's alive today because of it. That poor kid that tried to commit suicide because they wouldn't give him—his girlfriend was breaking up with him, and he had a detail, they wouldn't let him go home, and so he's gonna commit suicide. Wow, what a

problem that is. So what do they do? They kick him out of the Honor Guard and put him on a ship. It's like, oh, gees. I doubt very much if he survived that ship. But, you know… Well, anyway, I think I've probably taken up enough of your time to gag a horse.

HUNTER: Well, I did have one final question I wanted to… You kind of alluded to this earlier, but do you personally draw any parallels to the sort of environment what you had seen during the Vietnam era to today, and if you're reflecting on that at all?

THEBODO: Well, you know, on TV you see protests, you see violence. But what I experienced in Vietnam wasn't necessarily what I saw on TV. You know, getting teargassed at the end. That looked like it should have been on the news. In fact, it wouldn't surprise me if it had been. I was scared. We were scared. Here we are, we're trying to go home. But what we were going to do was this, that and the other, and a normal day at Tan Son Nhat. And I had many opportunities to fly into Tan Son Nhat and go do work on various… I've been to Vung Tau, I've been to Phan Rang, I've been to—what was that place? Saigon? I can't remember. The names are… But anyway, just to do some electronic fuses that they're hard to get to. I'm familiar with them. Bang. Now I can go back and use all the facilities at Tan Son Nhat. They've got a great EM [enlisted men] club, they've got the exchange. God, even though we've got air conditioned barracks, they don't have clubs and movies, and saw the *African Queen*, you know. I mean, it was nice getting where there were a lot of people.

And then going up in the city, you know, you just hail a cab, get away from the base, and there are GIs everywhere. I'm the only one without a gun. It's like the old West. But you could stop here. And, you know, avoid alleys, avoid good bargains. "You wanta buy this camera?" or somebody that wants to buy your camera. Somebody with a bunch of rolled up bills that's willing to buy money from you. There were certain things that you wanted to avoid. Stay away from the black market, even though the black market was everywhere and everybody used it. You know, you just wanted to make sure you were careful and where you went and how you did it.

But just being out in the open, you know, to go to a bar or a restaurant, you know, after a while you get comfortable

doing that. You've got all these business people. It's like New York City. It's like going to Chinatown. People are not worried. And then all of a sudden something happens. And that something for me was that last day. And Saigon became a place that I didn't want to be anymore. And again, it's interesting how you get comfortable dealing with things, and how you deal with them.

I live a charmed life. I did and I think I still do. So, I did go to Vietnam. Spent a whole year there. It scared me to death. I did well with it. I went to R&R. And I was proud of myself when I went on R&R because of all that crap that they—I mean, they literally tell you before you depart the aircraft that you shouldn't do this and you shouldn't do that. And, you know, nobody's asking questions. And they try to keep you in these brothel type areas. I went to a tourist agency and went on a tour on the other side of the island, and I was with a bunch of, I don't know, it was an old Jewish group. I was somebody's grandson for a whole day. I'm serious. We went on this tour of the marble mines and these big marble cliffs, this Taroko Gorge [Taiwan], I think it was. And I almost lost my camera because I didn't realize, in Taiwan, you can't take pictures out of an aircraft. They're very negative about that. And, you know, after my tour I got very comfortable wandering outside that main area. Taiwan was pretty cool. Spiro Agnew was there when I was there, so I couldn't stay in the hotel that I wanted to, because the Vice-President was staying there, and they didn't want enlisted people staying at that hotel. And I was like, "Oh, okay. Well, thanks." *Is he on R&R or what's his deal?* [laughter] But, anyway. Anything else?

HUNTER: No, I think that feels like a good place to stop if that's what you're comfortable with.

THEBODO: Yeah, I'm not sure I have anything else that would matter. I mean, you've heard my life story now. [laughter]

HUNTER: Well, it was very interesting, and again I want to thank you so much for participating in the project. We value every single interview we have, and I think this one has been particularly interesting, at least to me. So, thank you again. I'm going to stop recording now, unless you have anything else to say?

THEBODO: I don't. Unless you want to go on a tree tour.

HUNTER: Maybe later. There are beautiful trees on campus.

THEBODO: Well, you know, there is one of these classes that you can take that has a tree tour. And I did the original one many, many years ago, and I think it's really cool that they still do it. And I think they've taken it to a different level. You know, when I say this, I'm really serious. It started off as the walking club, and the nurse who ran it asked me if I'd be willing to maybe do a tour of the trees or something, to help out with the walking club. It seemed like a great idea, so I just drew up a little map of what might take an hour, and walked around and showed people what I considered to be some of the more interesting trees on campus. And now it's a full-blown adult education class. I think that's so cool. I mean, it really is. Anyway, that's about it.

HUNTER: Well, thank you so much.

THEBODO: You're very welcome.

[End of Interview.]