

Interview with William “Bill” Phillips

VRV-A-L-2013-019

Interview # 1: March 27, 2013

Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. “Fair use” criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Wednesday, March 27, 2013. My name is Mark DePue, the Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I’m in Springfield, talking to William H. Phillips, Bill Phillips. Good afternoon, Bill.

Phillips: Good afternoon, Mark.

DePue: We’re going to be talking about your Vietnam experience, but we’re going to take a little time getting there because of your route to Vietnam. There are a lot of people who had an interesting route to Vietnam, and you certainly did. But we always start with when and where you were born.

Phillips: I was born June 25, 1946, in Benton, Illinois.

DePue: And where would we find Benton?

Phillips: Benton’s in the southern part of the state. It’s fairly close to Carbondale, a little north of Carbondale. It was a coal mining community, rather poor. In the twenties and thirties, there were some industrial activities that dealt with the coal mine industry, but by World War II and the end of it, it was basically gone. It’s a very poor area commercially.

DePue: Did you grow up there?

Phillips: No, my family moved when I was only one year old. My father got an opportunity for a different job. My parents were both school teachers, and my

father got an opportunity to get a State job at the prison in Pontiac, Illinois, to teach, so we moved to Pontiac.

DePue: I should mention here, right at the beginning of this, you've been interviewed before for our program. That one was with Phil Pogue, and it was about our school reorganization project.

Phillips: It certainly was, yeah.

DePue: So tell us what you've been doing, and very briefly, tell us why you were interviewed for that.

Phillips: Okay. Basically, I have had a lot of experience over the last decades dealing with school district reorganization, which is the formal merging with various mechanisms and procedures in Illinois of school districts, entire school districts. I wrote my doctoral dissertation on that topic at the University of Illinois in Champaign and became very interested.

After Pontiac, we actually lived in a very small community called Chenoa, where it was always discussed. It was something that came up all the time. So I just began to study that and just kept working with it. Since then, I've completed fifty plus studies for districts, probably 150 school districts in Illinois, throughout the state, about districts that are interested in that process. That was basically my experience with it. I do a lot of public speaking about it, work with school boards.

DePue: You've already mentioned that Chenoa's where you grew up and that it's a small town. What else can you tell us about Chenoa?

Phillips: Chenoa was an agricultural community. The farmland around Chenoa was as good as it is in any place in the world. It had flat lands, very little lands that had trees on it. The farmers and the farmland there was first class, but that was basically the only industry of any kind, commercial activity, in Chenoa, very small community. My parents were both teachers in the elementary school, so that kept me pretty well in tow, as well as anything, when both of your parents are teachers in the district.

DePue: What were your parents' names?

Phillips: My dad's name was Burt, and my mother's name was Helen.

DePue: It wasn't Burton? It was just plain old Burt?

Phillips: No, Burt, William Burt. For the last four generations, we've all had the name William, either as the first name or the middle name. We alternate with who can use the name William. So my dad used the name Burt, and I use the name William. Now I have a son whose name is William Brandon, and he uses his

middle name. Then he has a son; they don't call him Bill though, so he's broken the chain, but he does have the name. (DePue laughs)

DePue: He just doesn't go by it.

Phillips: Yeah, right (laughs).

DePue: You said both your parents were grade school teachers?

Phillips: Yes. My mother taught third grade and occasionally some special reading classes. My father taught eighth grade mathematics and also was an administrator part of the time.

DePue: Did you get to have the experience of being in your parent's class?

Phillips: Well, I did actually, not with my mother but with my father. I was in a mathematics class with him in junior high, and that was quite an experience. He was a very well-known person, a very no-nonsense teacher. He was basically the disciplinarian for the school district. My friends gave my dad a wide walk-around. In fact, they used to ask me all the time, "How do you live with that guy?" (DePue laughs) because he was pretty stern. But he had a great sense of humor, and he loved teaching.

DePue: He wasn't that way at home?

Phillips: No, he actually wasn't. I never really challenged him to the point where I got in... I had a scrape or two, but nothing serious at home. He was busy all the time. He was going to school. He didn't start out with a degree. He and my mother got their bachelor's and master's late in life. I actually started with my mother because we were a poor family in a one-room school house when I was two years old because we couldn't afford a babysitter. I just went to school with her. I can actually remember attending a one-room school, like you see on pictures, with the stove in the middle and the well outside and all of that. I did that; that was an interesting experience.

DePue: But that wasn't your experience living in Chenoa?

Phillips: No. No, when we lived in Chenoa, basically we lived in the country. My dad considered himself a gentleman farmer, with about three acres of land. He liked to garden, so he was a big gardener. In fact, he would grow way more than we could ever eat or even give away. He was always giving this and that away, tomatoes or corn or whatever it is we were growing at the time. He liked to do that, and that was his hobby.

DePue: Did he ever get into administration?

Phillips: He did. He got into administration. I don't think he got an administrative degree, but they made him sort of like the dean of students, without that title.

But it was well-known that, if you got out of line, especially in the junior high, he was the person you had to go see. He considered himself the judge. He used to call himself the judge, and he would hold court. I was never in there, but they would tell me that he would hold court, and he would say "guilty," "not guilty." If it was guilty, you pretty well knew what the consequence was, which was a swat or swats, whatever.

DePue: That he would deliver himself?

Phillips: Yes, oh yes, personally.

DePue: Well, school has changed a bit since then.

Phillips: (laughs) Yes, it certainly has. In those days, [he was] either called sir or Mr. Phillips, one of the two. He didn't care which, but you didn't call him anything else but that.

DePue: So, when you were sitting in his math class, I would assume you kept your head down?

Phillips: Yeah, I did. He would take advantage of that; he'd laugh and ask me questions. I'd give him the same "sir" as everybody else, in class, around everybody.

DePue: Did you have any siblings?

Phillips: I have a brother who is an attorney, older brother. I have two sisters. One of my sisters was a college president. She went from a high school English teacher to be a college president.

DePue: What was the college?

Phillips: It was a Japanese college in Hawaii, Gong Sai Dar University. She was also a provost and a assistant president at Sacramento State, the one in California, that place that's so warm in the winter.

DePue: Palm Springs?

Phillips: Palm Springs, that's it, College of the Desert; that was it. Then I have another sister, whose husband was an engineer and very high up in engineering with Hughes Aircraft, did a lot of military contracting in the sixties and seventies, military weapons of one kind or another, especially ones that used radar. That was his specialty.

DePue: It sounds like education was in the blood in your family.

Phillips: Oh, yeah. It was very competitive in my family. You didn't want to be the last one. I knew right away it wasn't a matter of whether or not I'm going to

college. It was just where are you going to go, and what are you going to do when you get there? There was no if about it.

DePue: How about religion? Was your family religious?

Phillips: Well, yes and no. My mother was Catholic, and my father was Southern Baptist, which is a strange combination. I think, long before I was born—this occurred with my sisters and my brother too—we never went to church formally, but each of us, my brother and my sisters, went to different churches, basically on our own.

DePue: It sounds like you were encouraged to do that.

Phillips: We were. I went, and I enjoyed it. We all ended up in different churches and so on and so forth.

DePue: Which church did you end up going to?

Phillips: Methodist, Methodist.

DePue: Why did you choose the Methodists?

Phillips: I thought they had the nicest clientele, (DePue laughs) and they certainly had the nicest outings, with the prettiest ladies and stuff like that. But I did know the pastor, and he was a very nice guy. He was very easy for me to talk to.

DePue: You were born in 1946, so you're growing up in the era that most Americans look back as idyllic, the iconic age of being a kid in America—

Phillips: The fifties and sixties.

DePue: ...was that your experience?

Phillips: It was. But I didn't realize it at the time. There was no problem about getting jobs, and things were being built. I remember when Route 66 went to Route 55 and from two lanes to four lanes. That was very close to my house. Things were good; you would buy houses, and then you'd sell houses. It was good times. No war or anything was really going on. The Korean War was a little bit early in my memory cycle, even though my brother was in the Air Force at the time of the Korean War.

DePue: So he's quite a bit older than you?

Phillips: Oh, yes. He was fifteen years older than me.

DePue: Was your father a World War II veteran?

Phillips: He was. He was in the Navy for a brief period in World War II. He was in the Seabees. Then he got hurt on some project or whatever they were doing. He

never left the States, and he got out basically. But I thought it was unusual. He was like thirty-five years old when he was drafted, and he had three kids. That was a little different. Of course, that was World War II. He was in probably a year and a half to two years. He had five brothers, and I think three of them were in the military at different times.

DePue: Was there much to do in Chenoa, growing up?

Phillips: Not much in my estimation or recollection. Living in the country, it was a mile from my nearest friend, so I would ride my bike to their house, and we'd play baseball or whatever. But there wasn't the organized sports that we have today. I played sports in junior high and high school, but we didn't have the summer organized the way they have it now. So everything was a pick-up game. I was in 4-H because I lived on a farm, but we didn't have any animals.¹ I wasn't really a farmer; I did gardening. And I was in scouting. I just liked to be with people, around people, and so forth, so I did everything I could to try to be involved in anything where I could be around people. Living out in the country, it's somewhat lonely.

DePue: Did Chenoa have a high school?

Phillips: It did have a high school.

DePue: What was the student body population?

Phillips: I think we were at the highwater mark, pretty close to, when I was there of about 150 or 160 kids.

DePue: How many in your class?

Phillips: Forty-two, and I graduated third out of my class. (DePue laughs)

DePue: Well, you did very well.

Phillips: Top 10 percent. I tell my students that to this day; I graduated in the top 10 percent in my high school.

DePue: Were you involved in some extracurricular activities?

Phillips: I was. Actually, I wasn't a very good athlete. Baseball was my best game. I played a little basketball, not so much. I played a little in junior high and a little early on. I was a foreign exchange student to Norway, with the American Field Service, between my junior and senior year. I was very lucky to get that.

¹ 4-H is a U.S.-based network of youth organizations whose mission is "engaging youth to reach their fullest potential while advancing the field of youth development. Though typically thought of as an agriculturally focused organization as a result of its history, 4-H today focuses on citizenship, healthy living, science, engineering, and technology programs. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4-H>)

That was really a life-changing experience for me because I'd never really travelled to any extent.

DePue: Was that something that you wanted to do or were your parents kind of pushing you in that direction?

Phillips: No, actually, I signed up for it myself, with the American Field Service. I saw it; I don't really remember where I saw it advertised, so I signed up. They wanted me to write something. You had to write like an essay, a one-page essay or something like that. So I wrote something. Then they contacted me, and they interviewed me, and then you are selected to go. You don't get to pick the country where you want to go; they just send you there. They try to match your family with that family. The father in Norway was a teacher. Of course, my father was a teacher. I guess that was the connection. So, I went to Norway. In fact, when we got off the boat—we took a ship—there were about 1,000 of us.

DePue: All foreign exchange students?

Phillips: All foreign exchange students. The whole ship was full of us. We got off the boat in Europe, and they started taking off wherever they were going to go in Europe, all the way to northern Africa. Then I started making my way up by train. We travelled by train—which was very nice, by the way—to Norway. I was the very last student to get off the train in Norway, northern Norway.

DePue: Was there some way to get between Denmark and Norway?

Phillips: Yeah. They put the whole train on a ferry boat. They just drove the train on a ferry boat, put up the sides, and we just chugged right across. It was at night. It took about an hour, and then they just got there, coupled it up to the tracks, and just took right off again. We never got out of the train.

DePue: What was the learning curve like to speak the language?

Phillips: I didn't speak the language. For the ten days we were going over there, they had Norwegian students there with us, and they taught us a few basic phrases and a song or two and things like that, but we didn't speak Norwegian; nobody did. But what I found when I got there was that the average student my age knew English, **English** English, not American English. They didn't speak American. They spoke English English, Oxford English, and they knew English very well. They were very intelligent; it's very rigorous there.

DePue: I would think though that the classes you were getting were in Norwegian.

Phillips: Actually, they let me stay in the English classes all day long. I wasn't there that long. I was in the summer break. But when I was there, I would sit in the English classes, hour after hour. They wanted to hear me speak because they were used to English people coming and visiting Norway, especially northern

Norway, where the fishing is the big one. There were English tourists that would come, but Americans were very rare at the time.

In fact, we ran out of railroad track, and we couldn't go by railroad anymore. We had to go by boat. So we got on a coastal steamer and went up the last 100 miles, where I was going, by boat, because there was no train at that time that went that far. Roads weren't all that great, not that common.

DePue: Were you in a place that even the Norwegians would think would be out in the sticks?

Phillips: Yeah, I would say they were pretty much in the sticks. We were on an island, a big island, fifty miles long. But it was an island, and we were only fifty miles south of the Arctic Circle. Basically their summer, which is all day light—they have the midnight sun—it would stay dusk and dawn type light for about twenty-two hours a day. There was very little darkness. Then it's the reverse in the winter. That was a little hard to get used to.

DePue: What was on the menu?

Phillips: Well, I was afraid of that because I had no concept of what they ate, but basically what they ate was a lot of fish of one kind or another, because fish is their... Beef was unknown, basically; pork, very rare; chicken on occasion; fish and pastries, oddly enough, and cheese. And they had some hard crackers and hard bread.

I called her my mother. She was a little lady, and she didn't speak a word of English, so we just sort of looked at each other. But every day she would go down to the market and get some bread and cheese or basics, milk, that sort of thing. We had a refrigerator. We were upper-class there, no TV, no car, not even a bicycle. They had one, but it didn't have any wheels. (both laugh) So [if] you're going to go somewhere, you had to walk down to the village, and you could get on a bus. Then, if you were going to go any farther than that, you had to get on a boat and go there, wherever it was.

DePue: How long were you there?

Phillips: I was there about four and a half months. We travelled through Norway and Denmark, some Sweden, Germany. We got off the boat in Holland. We got on the boat in Holland again, so we backtracked. I really enjoyed it. I really liked it. The people were very nice to me. They just treated me like I was just really something special. They just hadn't seen many Americans.

DePue: Now, you mentioned when you were in Chenoa, and you were selecting churches, in part you were selecting churches based on the clientele. How was the clientele?

Phillips: Clientele in Norway was pretty good (both laugh). The ladies and the young girls in the high school... They called it a gymnasium, which was their high school, which is much more rigorous than our high school. I couldn't believe the rigor that they had in the high school. I was used to high school students kind of fooling around a lot, writing notes and that sort of thing. That **never** happened in Norway, not at all. It was serious, no nonsense business during the school day.

But they were very nice to me, and the girls, I have to admit, they were anxious to get to know me and talk to me and so forth, which was fine with me. I was glad to talk to anybody. I enjoyed going to dances that they had, where they would play the accordion and do the polka type dances. I didn't really know that, but I did the best I could and enjoyed that, laughed.

DePue: I don't suppose you have a picture or two you could share?

Phillips: I do. At home, I do have some pictures from Norway I can bring.

DePue: Did all of that experience change your perspective?

Phillips: It did actually. I'd never really been on trips, not even much in the United States had travelled, much less go to another country kind of by myself and actually attend a school in another country. So, when I got back, I was much more serious. I was pretty serious about seeing what was involved in education because I knew it meant so much to them. If they flunked the test that they had to take every year, they were out. They were just gone. They couldn't go to school anymore, unless you were wealthy enough to pay for it on your own. We all kind of take it for granted. So I took a few things like that a whole lot more seriously than I had before. I think I was kind of fundamentally changed. I think it was a positive thing for me. It gave me a much wider perspective.

DePue: What other extracurricular activities? You mentioned baseball. Did you do anything else in high school?

Phillips: I was in the organizations. I was the class president and vice president, and I was the editor of the yearbook. I wrote for the student newspaper. I was in the National Honor Society, all that stuff. I was in, I think, two of the plays, junior play and senior play, lettermen's club, things like that.

DePue: From your perspective, and you've been around education most of your life now, what are the advantages and the disadvantages of going to such a small school?

Phillips: The advantages were you knew everybody, and everyone knew you. Everybody didn't like that, but I did like that. I liked the atmosphere. It was like a big family, if you will. My grandkids and kids attended some high schools of 2,500 kids in a high school. I think that's awfully large. They did

well to even know the other kids in their class or even half of them; they just couldn't do it. I enjoyed it. At the time I probably wasn't too enamored with it, because we didn't have all that many activities, but we would have dances and proms and stuff like that, not like they do now, where you have to have guards and security people. It was very easy going and kind of fun and harmless.

Disadvantages, we just didn't have much rigor—I'm saying that now—in the curriculum. We didn't have a lot of high math courses. We had Spanish, two years. We had Latin, which I took, which was totally useless, but I took it anyway. When I found out, really, what I didn't know was when I went to Illinois State [University, ISU] as a freshman. I have to admit that I kind of sailed through high school, without really a whole lot of rigor there, competition, if you will. I got to ISU, and it was a much bigger field of play, a lot more kids coming from schools that had a whole lot more classes that they'd been offered, a lot more competition. It was a difficult the first semester. It was (laughs) a culture shock for me to see what I didn't know. But I persevered; I learned quickly, but I certainly didn't have what they had when they came.

DePue: Because you're going to end up in the Vietnam War and the way that you got there, I want to ask you a few other questions that would have occurred while you were still in high school, because you graduated in 1964. Those are the JFK [John Fitzgerald Kennedy, President of the United] years. Were you a fan of JFK?

Phillips: At the time, I liked JFK. I can't say that I really followed politics the way that I do now, but I liked him. I didn't really care for Lyndon Johnson [President of the United States] a whole lot. I thought that he was rather a cold person. JFK was a very charming person, very vibrant, and his family and so forth. Having little kids in the White House, I thought was a great thing.

I can remember the Bay of Pigs thing, when he owned up to that. I thought, Well, my gosh.² And I can remember the Cuban Missile Crisis.³ I was paying very close attention to that on TV, when he appeared, saying the Russians have missiles there and so on and so forth. I know we got started in Vietnam, basically, about that time, but I wasn't paying any attention to Vietnam at that time.

² The Bay of Pigs Invasion was a failed military invasion of Cuba undertaken by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-sponsored paramilitary group, Brigade 2506 in April 1961. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bay_of_Pigs_Invasion)

³ The Cuban Missile Crisis was a 13-day confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, initiated by the American discovery of Soviet ballistic missile deployment in Cuba. The confrontation is often considered the closest the Cold War came to escalating into a full-scale nuclear war. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cuban_Missile_Crisis)

I can remember; I was sitting in a high school mathematics class when somebody walked in and said he'd [President Kennedy] been killed. We kind of went through a period there, from about sixty-three to sixty-eight of Martin Luther King, and then his [JFK's] brother, RFK [Robert F. Kennedy], and those kinds of things.^{4, 5} Then we had the problems in the South that were just really getting started, the racial issues.

DePue: The sit-ins, the segregation, the freedom rides.

Phillips: Oh, my gosh, yeah, and the dogs and the water hoses and so on and so forth. I'd never really been to the South, and I really didn't know blacks. I'm not sure if I'd... I may have met one or two.

DePue: Not in your school?

Phillips: Oh, no, no, none in our town, none that I could even think of, until I got to college.

DePue: Chenoa, is that an area primarily settled by Germans and Scandinavians?

Phillips: Yeah, yeah, I would say it is. I can remember the German names, Schickendanz and Aschenbrenner (laughs) and different names like that, that were pretty German. I didn't have any frame of reference for the racial issues that were going on. I actually felt very sorry for them and what was going on. I didn't know quite how to handle that one, until I got to college, and then it got worse.

DePue: You're talking about the Civil Rights issue?

Phillips: Yeah, right.

DePue: What were your plans, coming out of high school? You said college was obviously required.

Phillips: Well, I was going to go to college; there was no doubt about that. I thought about other colleges [other than Illinois State University], but I got a teacher's scholarship right away. A teacher's scholarship at the time paid for your tuition, and it paid for your books to go into the teaching field. That was pretty attractive to my dad, and of course, he liked that anyway. I really wanted to be a lawyer. That was kind of **my** long-term goal.

DePue: Why?

⁴ Martin Luther King Jr. was an American Baptist minister and activist who became the most visible spokesperson and leader in the civil rights movement, from 1954 until his assassination in 1968. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King_Jr.)

⁵ Robert Francis "Bobby" Kennedy was an American politician and lawyer who served as the 64th United States Attorney General from January 1961 to September 1964, and as a U.S. Senator from New York from January 1965 until his assassination in June 1968. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robert_F._Kennedy)

- Phillips: I can't answer that, other than I thought that was a good profession. I thought it was a high-level job, a very respectable thing, and probably very lucrative.
- DePue: Did you grow up watching Perry Mason episodes?⁶
- Phillips: I did; I did, but that wasn't what attracted me to it. I just thought it was a good position, a good job to have. People would respect you and so on and so forth, so I wanted to do it.
- DePue: Illinois State isn't that far away from Chenoa. Did you live on campus?
- Phillips: I did. I lived on campus. Except for a brief period, one time during [my time] there, I lived on campus.
- DePue: Whose decision was that?
- Phillips: Really mine. I probably could have stayed at home. I had an old beater car. It wasn't the greatest car, but I probably could have driven back and forth. I started taking summer classes too to try to get ahead of the game and so on and so forth. So, I was going to school a lot, and then I had some jobs in school. I worked in Penney's, selling shoes and clothes.⁷ I worked at the University Union in the recreation hall. That was where I learned to play pool. Still play pool, whenever I can.
- DePue: A lucrative skill.
- Phillips: A lucrative skill, it was. It really helped me with the money for dates and things like that on occasion (both laugh). College years were good. I lived there. I lived with basically the same group after my freshman year. Oddly enough, they were almost all from Chicago, and they were almost all athletes. They were all college athletes, football players, baseball players, wrestlers, track people, whatever, but me.
- DePue: Small town kid from Chenoa with no discernable athletic skills.
- Phillips: Yeah, yeah. But I tended to be a little bit more serious about school than a lot of them were. I was kind of well-known for being able to assist them with their college rigor, on occasion. And they were nice; they were very nice to me.
- DePue: This wasn't a fraternity though?

⁶ Perry Mason was an American legal drama series originally broadcast on CBS television from 1957 to 1966. The title character, portrayed by Raymond Burr, was a fictional Los Angeles criminal-defense lawyer who originally appeared in detective fiction by Erle Stanley Gardner.

([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perry_Mason_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Perry_Mason_(TV_series)))

⁷ J. C. Penney Company, Inc. is an American department store chain with 864 locations in 49 U.S. states and Puerto Rico. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._C._Penney)

Phillips: No. They weren't allowed at that time.

DePue: At the time you got to college, 1964, that was an age when the draft was always a factor of a young man's decision-making process.

Phillips: Oh yeah. In those days, you could go to college and get your bachelor's degree, and they wouldn't try to draft you.

DePue: A student deferment then?

Phillips: Right. And then, by the time I was getting ready to graduate, in the late sixties, the rules were starting to change. Earlier than that, if you wanted to get a master's degree, you could keep on going and get your student deferment. By the time sixty-eight rolled around, they weren't giving you student deferments for graduate degrees. I wanted to do that, and they said, "No, you can't do that."

DePue: We're going to get back to the whole draft issue in a little bit, but I wanted to ask you about your major.

Phillips: History? Well, I really liked history, even though my dad told me, he said, "You know son, being a history major is not going to be a job where you're really going to have a lot of job opportunities. Teaching it, you can do that and so on and so forth, but other than that..." But I liked it. I persevered because I just liked history.

DePue: You saw that as a nice ramp into the law school?

Phillips: I thought so. What my plan was was to get my bachelor's degree. Then you have to take the law school admission test, and if you do well enough on it— But I never got to do that, until actually after the Army—then kind of go to the law school. I knew I couldn't go to the private ones. I just couldn't afford that. So it was going to have to be University of Illinois at Champaign, and I think Carbondale had a law school at the time. That was really about it for public schools.

DePue: What did your dad think about your aspirations to be a lawyer?

Phillips: He thought that was fine. He was very proud of me. As long as I was thinking about some profession or something like that, he was okay with it. My sister married an engineer who just went right through and got his doctorate and became a bigtime engineering whatever, military stuff basically. My other sister, she took a long time to get her degree. She was a very driven person. My brother was an attorney, and he was determined that he was going to do that. He was in California. They all gravitated to California, except me. Our family was very friendly competitive, if you will, especially about education and stuff like that.

DePue: It sounded like you kept pretty busy in high school. How about in college. Did you have extracurriculars then?

Phillips: Not too many formal activities that I do in college. I was in a social fraternity, which wasn't a fraternity where we lived together. It was just... We got together, and you were asked to be in it, Alpha Phi Omega, APO, which was nice. I didn't play any sports other than intramural sports. I didn't get into the student government or anything like that. I was kind of busy working. I had to do jobs and then go to school too. I didn't have a whole lot of time to do other things.

DePue: The years you were in college, 1964 to 1968, were rather tumultuous years for most college campuses. This is the student rights movement, as you get farther into that four-year period. Vietnam is really rearing its head. Tell me about the political climate on the campus of Illinois State University.

Phillips: Well, that became very serious business. I can remember the SDS, the Students for Democratic Society, was very active there, and they were sort of like militant, right-wingers. Maybe that's the wrong wing; I'm not sure whatever they were.

DePue: I think they would have been on the left side.

Phillips: Left-wingers. But they were very, very militant, and they sponsored sit-ins. I think we had at least one sit-in, where they occupied the administration building, and they wanted this and wanted that. Then they got into the racial thing. They got into some marches or whatever with the black students, wanting this or that on campus. And there were some issues. I really didn't get involved in that stuff, but there were issues between factions of students who didn't like that, and there were a few altercations. I just tried to stay away from that kind of problem, because I was a little more serious about going to school, and I wasn't that serious about the politics of what was happening in the country, with the student rights movement.

Of course, Vietnam, as the years went on, started to become a bigger issue with me. By the time I was a junior, you're starting to think about that, because they were very insistent on trying to get everybody they could into the Army.

DePue: Who's they?

Phillips: Well, the draft boards and the people who are... They're looking for soldiers. That provided the soldiers for Vietnam, or at least the bulk of them. Unlike these new wars, the National Guard and the [Army] Reserves really played very little part in any activity in Vietnam. They didn't send them; they left them here. I guess that was a national policy decision, but they did.

DePue: Was there a Chenoa draft board?

Phillips: Pontiac.

DePue: Pontiac, they were the ones who had your future in their hands?

Phillips: Yeah, right. (laughs)

DePue: How did that process work? Did you have to register?

Phillips: Well, my dad was on the draft board years ago. He knew all about it because he'd been on the draft board. In fact, that was the reason my brother joined the Air Force during the Korean War. He was going to college, and he was in the middle of college. He joined the Air Force. I remember him coming home and telling my dad he joined the Air Force. Dad said, "What did you do that for?" He said, "I felt bad because you're on the draft board, and everybody said you're protecting me." Dad said, "I'm not protecting you. You could at least finish your degree." Well, he didn't; he joined the Air Force.

My dad was kind of heartbroken about that, so he got off the draft board. He kind of knew the machinations of it. Basically, they needed, by some sort of quota system, based on your census—I guess; I don't know—they needed so many people, and they graded them. Once you're initially found to be eligible, you go for a medical exam and then the exemptions. Some people got them; some people didn't and so on and so forth.

DePue: Were you following any of the war news?

Phillips: I started to by the time I was a senior in college. That was in history anyway; I liked to follow it and watch it. It was on TV [television], and I think that was the first military war that they really had on TV. You could actually see them fighting battles and combat situations on TV. Oh yeah, I was watching it.

DePue: Were you thinking, Gee, this looks like an infantry war. I might want to join the Air Force or the Navy instead.

Phillips: Yeah, I thought about that. Actually, I thought about that too late, because by that time, when I started thinking about it, I actually checked on that, even the National Guard and the reserves. By that time, they had waiting lists of guys who were signing up for that. I probably should have thought about that earlier, but I didn't. I thought, originally, that I might get some consideration, after I graduated from college, being a college graduate, but I didn't. I ended up with no consideration whatsoever. I thought about the Air Force or the Navy, not the Marines (both laugh). I have a cute story about the Marines I can tell you.

DePue: You might as well launch into it now.

Phillips: The day I was actually inducted into the Army, in Chicago, these Marine drill sergeants—They looked like drill sergeants because they were big burly guys,

dressed in immaculate uniforms. They just looked like picture soldiers—were walking around, and they were talking to all of us that were going through the line, [saying] that they needed 10 percent of all the people going through the service station that day, that big building. Ten percent they were going to get, but they wanted the best 10 percent. They only wanted the biggest, baddest, fastest, meanest, whatever. I thought, Oh, I don't want to do that.

So I purposely got in line between two of the tallest guys I could find. They must have been six foot six or seven, both of them. They were a good head taller than me. So those Marines just walked right past me (DePue laughs), didn't give me a nod. I can remember them pulling a guy or two out of the line and taking them into this room. They were just kicking and screaming; they didn't want to be in the Marines. But when they went into that room, they were Marines. I don't think they even asked them. I don't know, but I didn't go into that room! (both laugh)

DePue: How about the two guys that flanked you?

Phillips: No, they didn't either, but I did that on purpose. I remember to this day thinking, I've got to make myself the least appealing that I possibly can, since they want the leanest, meanest, toughest, biggest, all this. I figured, Well, I'm just going to... That was kind of my philosophy in the Army altogether, the first part of it was just, stay in the background, just blend in, keep your mouth shut (laughs).

DePue: The tail end of your senior year is 1968—I'm sure you remember this—the Tet Offensive begins about late January or early in February sixty-eight, and suddenly it's on everybody's radar screen. Do you remember?⁸

Phillips: Yeah, Walter Cronkite. I remember that well. Walter Cronkite was the big anchorman on TV news, and everybody really liked him and respected him. He went to Vietnam, and I can remember him saying, "Well, it doesn't look like we're winning here." He really thought we ought to figure out some way to get out of this because he didn't see us winning.

I got to thinking, Holy cow, we're not even winning over there? My assumption was that we're just going to go over there and kick the snot out of them real quick. What could they possibly have to stop the United States Army, with all of our technology, not to mention our numbers and everything else we had? I couldn't imagine them being any sort of a formidable enemy.

Then that came about. I think everybody was sort of disillusioned after that. We'd been over there two or three years, and everybody's telling us along the way, "Well, we're going real good. We just need some more

⁸ The Tet Offensive was a series of surprise attacks by the Vietcong (rebel forces sponsored by North Vietnam) and North Vietnamese forces on scores of cities, towns, and hamlets throughout South Vietnam. It was considered to be a turning point in the Vietnam War. (<https://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h1862.html>)

soldiers. Just send us another 50,000 or 100,000, whatever.” And we’re there for a couple of years, and we’re still not winning. Oh, my gosh. We’re not winning this thing.” I figured...

DePue: By 1967, especially into early sixty-eight, I would think that the student protestors were saying things like, “It’s not just that we’re not winning. This is the wrong war. This is not a just war.” Were you hearing that?

Phillips: Some of that, but not much. That really came about after Tet. I’ll tell you, when that really started was even later than that, after some of the Vietnam vets came back and started telling about what they were finding over there and so forth.

But I would say, before Tet, the country, or at least me and most everybody in it, was pretty well behind the government. We thought, Well, if we don’t go over there and do something, we’ll have another Korea where the Chinese or, whatever, the Russians will come down and take over South Vietnam and then blah, blah, blah. So we thought, Well, it’s a good thing to do, and we’re doing the right thing.

But then, after a while, I would say after Tet and we’d been there a few years, and we still weren’t winning, then everybody thought, Well, something’s wrong in Denmark, here. The most powerful country in the world takes on a fairly small, backward country, and we’re not winning? Why is that?

DePue: That’s about the time you got there, so we’ve got a little bit more to go before we get you there (Phillips laughs). I did want to ask you about a couple of other events that you’ve already alluded to in 1968, one before and one after you graduated. Martin Luther King’s assassinated on April 4.

Phillips: I remember that. It happened just before I graduated. I lived in a house with ten guys, and we had one black guy who lived with us. His name was Horace Box. I remember the name very well. Horace actually was derided by his friends for living with us. He was a track star, and he just happened to live with us, but his friends didn’t care for that too much.

DePue: Why? They thought he should live with other blacks?

Phillips: Yeah, absolutely. They would never come over to be with us, and we didn’t go over to be with them. Now Horace did; he functioned in both environments. They wanted him to live over there, but he liked living with us, and that was fine with us. It was not a problem. But I could sense the tension between us just, even in that small example.

DePue: Did you understand the other point of view, their resentment to having him live with you guys?

Phillips: I always felt that it was pretty short-sighted of them. I said, "It doesn't matter to me." I don't look at Horace being any better or worse than any of the other guys. He did the same silly things, and we did the same silly things, and we got along together. I went to his wedding, right after we graduated. His dad, oddly enough, ran a barbecue stand, in Rockford. Imagine that, he made barbecue. So I went to his (laughs) family places. I love soul music and soul food and stuff like that.

DePue: Was there barbecue at the wedding?

Phillips: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. Oh, it was wonderful food at the wedding. We all went, and I think we were the only white people there. Then he went to a wedding with some of our guys, and he was certainly the only black person there. So, it was a tense time for that. Nobody wanted to try to get along.

DePue: Did you understand all of that, or was that something you kind of tuned out?

Phillips: Well, I really didn't. I didn't understand what the problem was. I liked Horace, and if I got to know a person, and I liked him, I liked him. It didn't matter to me whether he was black or not, but it mattered to them. It seemed like it mattered more to them than to us, but that's just me saying that.

DePue: You say them and us. It mattered more to the blacks than it did the white students?

Phillips: Yeah. That carried over in the Army too. We saw that consistently. The blacks tended to congregate with each other in the Army, and they did in college too. They lived together; they liked to socialize together; they did everything together, and they didn't want to mix. I think a lot of my friends, and certainly me, would have mixed more, had we had an opportunity. But if they didn't want to be around us, I didn't want any trouble with somebody who didn't want to be around me.

I saw that for years, in lines and so forth in the military, the blacks tended to congregate together, stay together, stick together, socialize together [more] than the others. There were some guys from the South who were very tense about this, and then other guys like me who...I didn't really understand the tension there. There was a lot of tension between this group and then the blacks, and that continued through Vietnam. They did everything together. They trusted each other.

I never had problems with them, other than one time when they refused to go on a mission, as a group. They absolutely refused to go on a mission, and Cambodia was the mission. The entire group in our battalion—There must have been thirty, forty, fifty of them—got together, and they refused to go. I remember the officers going over to talk to them and yelling at them and threatening them. The commander went over there, the battalion commander, and talked to them. Come early in the morning, when we left,

they were still sitting there. I don't know what happened to them. I never saw them again. That's the worst that I saw of that.

DePue: Do you know what they were saying about why they refused to go?

Phillips: They just said that this is not our war. I think they... "Why should we get killed?" And I'm thinking, Well, you're in the Army; you're in Vietnam. That's the chance you take in a place like this. I'm taking this chance. Heck, I don't want to get shot any worse than you do, but there's things you've got to do, and this is just one of those things that comes up in life. They were not going to do it.

DePue: Were there any blacks that went on the mission?

Phillips: Not in our battalion. Yes, there were. I saw some later. There was no problem, but that group that was in our battalion. Of course, we were all together on the air strip, waiting to go the next day. I don't know how this all got started or what. I was close to it, but not real close. I was frankly surprised. I didn't know what would happen. I thought, Holy smokes. You're in the Army in a combat situation and soldiers telling you, "I refuse to go?"

DePue: But when the unit came back, they never showed up in the unit again?

Phillips: No. No. No. I don't know where they went.

DePue: There weren't any rumors about court marshals or being sent to Leavenworth or anything like that?⁹

Phillips: We heard stories of that, but I could never verify it. I don't know. I didn't know; I never knew what happened to them after that.

DePue: Let's go back to 1968. This had been right after you graduated. It's in the middle of the primary for the Republicans and Democrats, and by this time LBJ [President Lyndon Baines Johnson] had bowed out of the whole thing, so it's a wide-open primary. June, right after the California primary, Robert Kennedy is assassinated.

Phillips: Right. I thought that was a fishy deal, going to Memphis, being shot on a motel room.

DePue: That would have been Martin Luther King.

Phillips: Yeah. That was Martin Luther King. You're talking about RFK? At the time, I didn't think of anything. I'm a little more knowledgeable about those events

⁹ The United States Disciplinary Barracks (popularly known as Leavenworth) is a military correctional facility, the only maximum security prison for military personnel of all branches, located on Fort Leavenworth, a United States Army post in Kansas. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Leavenworth)

now than I was then. That seemed a little more cut and dried, where the guy just shot him in a pantry, and they had the guy, unlike MLK, when they had the guy, but then he later said, "Well, I didn't do it," and there was a lot of controversy about it.

I figured this was all kind of wrapped up together. I knew that there was some sort of huge policies, decisions that were being made or thought about or whatever. I know that King, while he was non-violent, was basically against the Vietnam War, and that probably was very threatening to people. I'm not sure I knew a lot of that then. RFK, I probably would have voted for him. I liked RFK. I thought he was a very appealing guy, smart.

DePue: This would have been your first election I would guess.

Phillips: Probably. Yeah. But I don't think I even voted. [Richard M.] Nixon got elected, and I thought Nixon was kind of a colorless guy, just sort of a cold person. I was hoping, because they started talking about peace in sixty-eight. I think that's when the Paris [Peace Talks] really started. They started talking. I thought, Oh, boy, if they wrap this thing up before I get in there... Of course, that didn't happen.

DePue: I don't know that that started during LBJ. I could be dead wrong, but I thought that started with Nixon.

Phillips: It did, with Nixon.

DePue: Sixty-nine is when he got to office. A lot of the things that you hear about that timeframe now is that Americans were starting to wonder, What in the world's happening to us? We've got riots in the street. We've got all these assassinations. You, being a student of history, at least, were you kind of in tune with that?

Phillips: I felt that there was something swimming around at a very big level that I didn't know about or didn't know of. By this time, I was pretty leery of the JFK assassination. I wasn't sure that [John Harvey] Oswald did all of that that they said he did, even then. I'd read some of the early books by Mark Lane and that judge from New Orleans and whatever, so I wasn't sure of that. Then MLK, he was really sticking his neck out, with this opposition to the military, and I didn't know all about Hoover that I know now, about his involvement in all that.¹⁰

¹⁰ John Edgar Hoover was the first director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of the United States and an American law enforcement administrator. Hoover has been credited with founding and building the FBI into a larger crime-fighting agency than it was at its inception and with instituting a number of modernizations to police technology, such as a centralized fingerprint file and forensic laboratories. Later in life and after his death, Hoover became a controversial figure as evidence of his secretive abuses of power began to surface. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._Edgar_Hoover)

- DePue: J. Edgar Hoover.
- Phillips: Yeah. Then, when RFK was killed, I thought, Holy smokes, it just seems like they're just wiping the slate clean of people from that persuasion or whatever. They're just getting rid of all of them. I didn't really know or even imagine there was any connection to them whatsoever, but it was very obvious to me that things were happening on a big-time national policy level that I certainly was not aware of.
- DePue: And then you graduate from college in the summer of sixty-eight, and all of this politics is going to have a direct bearing on your future.
- Phillips: (laughs) Actually, I got married in June, right after I graduated, which was sort of very common those days, to get married after you graduated.
- DePue: Tell me about your wife.
- Phillips: She was one year younger than me in college, at ISU.
- DePue: Met her there?
- Phillips: Met her there. Met her in college.
- DePue: What was her name?
- Phillips: Kathy, with a K.
- DePue: Her last name?
- Phillips: Her maiden name was Weisenbach. That's a good German name for you. We dated the last few years in college, and then I graduated, and she was going to go another year. I was fully expecting to just go right into the Army. In fact, I was slated to go into the Army about a week, maybe ten days, after we were married, in August. So I had my little bag packed and kissed her, said, "Well, I'm on my way."

I go to Chicago, and oddly enough, a couple of things happened. First of all, this was during the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, right in the middle of all that historical stuff with the police and the dogs and the riots, and holy smokes. There were thousands of college kids roaming the streets, wearing football helmets, and I don't know. It was not a good time to be a college student in Chicago, if you didn't have anything to do with that. That was, of course, after I was turned down to go into the Army, which really mystified me.

I was going through the building again, for the second time. You go through a lot of the same stuff, and they do a complete medical check-up of you. And one of the young doctors, he was asking me questions about

childhood diseases. I told him I'd had asthma when I was a child. He said, "You had?" I said, "Yeah, I had asthma when I was a child, used to wheeze all the time and so forth." He said, "Do you have a doctor's letter?" I said, "No, I didn't know it would do me any good." He said, "Well, I'll tell you what. I'm going to certify you as medically unfit at this time. You get a doctor's letter, and we'll give you a medical deferment." Well, I was flummoxed. I thought, Holy smokes. Is it that easy or whatever? (laughs)

Then I go out of the building, then right in the middle of all this riot and everything. I have to wait a couple hours for my train, to go back. So I'm just going in buildings, trying to stay away from everybody until I can get to the train station and get out of there. Then I go home.

I never expected to come home, so I'd made no plans whatsoever. I talked to my dad, and he said, "You need to get a job right away, a teaching job." Of course, I had a teaching certificate. I said, "Dad, this is the third week in August. School is starting now." He called a couple of people. He said, "I want you to call the superintendent from Pontiac Elementary tomorrow." Okay, so I called him, and he said, "Come up to my office. How soon can you be here?" I said, "Well, about an hour." He said, "Good."

I go in his office and sit there, and we talk for just a minute. He said, "What kind of certificate do you have?" I said, "Six through twelve. I'm a trained high school history teacher, with some German language skills." And he said, "Six through twelve, huh?" I said, "Yep." He said, "Well, I've got a job for you." I said, "Really?" He said, "Yeah, I need you to teach sixth grade." I said, "Well, what do I teach?" He said, "Everything." I said, "What do you mean 'everything'?" He said, "Everything, English and math and science." I said, "I've never had any courses in any of that." "Don't worry. You'll know more than they know." (laughs)

He takes me to this school where they'd had a young female teacher. She was brand new, and she lasted exactly three days. There was a tough bunch of kids from across the tracks in this particular room. He said, "I've got to have a man teacher." I said, "Okay, I'm your guy." I was pretty desperate. I needed a job and whatever. It worked out pretty good. We got, along after we came to an agreement as to who was the boss and all that.

DePue: You discussed who's going to be in charge.

Phillips: I figured out quick who was the biggest, meanest, roughest kid in the class, and his name was Hinshaw. What was his first name? I forget. I said, "Hinshaw, there used to be a lady named Hinshaw that used to babysit me when I was little." He said, "That's my grandma." I said, "Really." "Oh, yeah."

I knew the family history for this boy. The reason he was so mean all the time was his father just beat him unmercifully and was gone a lot. His mother was...If she wasn't in jail...she was in and out. He lived with his grandma, and his grandma took care of him. So I just tucked that away in my memory bank, and the first time we clashed, I said, "You know, I think I'm going to have to call your grandma." He said, "Don't call my grandma. You could have done anything you wanted. You could have swatted him until the cows come home, and it wouldn't have bothered him a second. He was bigger than me anyway. But calling his grandma was... He didn't want that.

I did call his grandma, and she came to a discussion or came to an understanding with him the next day. He came in and said, "Listen, if you don't call my grandma anymore, we'll come to an agreement here." We came to an agreement, and I didn't have any more problems in the class, and I didn't call grandma anymore. (both laugh) It worked fine. I didn't have to arm wrestle him or anything. Anyway, that was teaching that year.

I knew that they [the Army] were going to get back to me pretty quick, and they did, within a month or so. They said, "Well, you got your letter?" I was trying desperately to get a letter because the doctor who treated me was dead, long dead, so I wasn't going to get anything like that, and they were lining up for me again. They said, "We'll let you finish the year, not take you out of your teaching job. You're ours again in June." And that's what happened. By the end of the school year, in June, I was gone, mid-June. This time, no asthma, none of that stuff. I sailed right through the physical this time.

DePue: By 1969 there was over 500,000 troops on the ground in Vietnam.

Phillips: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And everybody that was in the Army then...They figured 50 percent of everybody in the Army then, doing anything, was going to Vietnam. I thought maybe I'd have a shot to go to Germany, because we had a lot of troops go to Germany. I had language skills there, plus I had a college degree. Well, neither one of those did me a nickel's worth of good, none of them.

DePue: You would have been drafted for two years. If you had enlisted in the Air Force or Navy, it would have been three years. Why didn't you consider doing that?

Phillips: I did; I would have. But again, there were so many people on what they called the waiting list that I couldn't get in. They had a list of guys who wanted to join, and they went through them by order of when you signed up. I couldn't move up on the list.

DePue: In other words, anybody who was going to be drafted was going either to the Army or the Marine Corps?

Phillips: Yeah. I never even heard of anybody being drafted for the Air Force or the Navy.

DePue: I want to go back to just a couple more questions about the democratic convention and you being right in the midst of it. After all of that, Dan Walker helped write a report, and he ended up saying in that report that this was a police riot, which didn't make Mayor Richard J. Daley very happy.

Phillips: I can tell you that I can remember seeing the police. They wore powder blue helmets, and they all were armed with big, long night sticks, not the night sticks that you see now, but night sticks about three feet long. These were substantial instruments. I can vividly see them because I was close... The train station was close to a rallying point for the students. There was thousands of them there. I was just inching along the side of the building, trying to stay away from everybody. I was only two or three blocks from the train station. I was just trying to stay out of everybody's... I knew I wasn't going to get a cab because they were all busy.

But I can remember the police just wading into them, the students, and just flailing away. A lot of the students had on football helmets, not army helmets, but like football helmets to try to protect themselves. I saw a few of them when they'd throw the tear gas. They'd throw those into the crowd, and then, if the crowd could, they'd throw them back. That went back and forth. I saw them turn over a couple of cars.

DePue: The students?

Phillips: The students, yeah. But it seemed to me like... They [the police] would just wade right in, without much provocation, other than yelling at them, cussing at them, and just start whacking on them. I saw a whole bunch of them [students] get whacked pretty good with one of those night sticks. You get hit once or twice with one of those night sticks, and you're hurt. I was just doing the best I could to just stay away from it, because I was the right age as the rest of those guys.

DePue: And you didn't have a football helmet on.

Phillips: I did not have a football helmet. I was just trying to stay the lowest profile I could, but it was pretty plain to me... I can remember the police walking down the street, arm in arm with those... They had on a shield, some sort of shield, with their powder blue helmets they had and those big night sticks. They'd wade right into the crowds and... They'd yell at them with the bullhorns for a while and tell them to disperse and all that. Then they'd [students] yell back things that wasn't very nice. I saw a few Vietnamese flags, Viet Cong flags, with the yellow star.

DePue: What was your reaction to seeing those?

Phillips: I thought that was way out of line. I don't care what they thought. This is still our country, and that was an enemy that we were fighting. That didn't help the sympathy for the students, even though I was one then. I didn't like that at all.

DePue: If you would have had to decide about which side you would want to be on, which side would you have come down on?

Phillips: Probably the government, the police or whatever.

DePue: But from your description, you did think it was a police riot?

Phillips: I thought they were pretty zealous in what they did. I think they just waded into those groups of kids. They [the police] were told, "You just break this thing up. I don't care how you do it." There was no talking to them; there was no yelling at them, "We're going to arrest you" and take them away in paddy wagons, real pleasant-like. That wasn't going to happen. They just waded in and starting whaling on everybody until they [the students] just got scared enough and broke it off. I wasn't there all that long, maybe two hours.

DePue: Did you pay any attention to some of the leaders of the protest, the guys who became the Chicago Seven afterwards?¹¹

Phillips: I may have seen them from a distance. They were on a platform or something like that, talking to people. I can remember one wore some kind of an American flag as a shirt or something like that. I didn't care for that either. But they were a distance away. These were the really radicals that I'd seen in college and stuff like that, the SDS people and the people who had bombed government buildings or school buildings.¹² I didn't really care for students taking over campus buildings and sitting in and all of that. I didn't really see what they were going to get out of it, other than just to show that they could do it. I don't even remember what it was all about, whether there were certain things they wanted or... I don't quite remember that.

DePue: That gets us back to June of sixty-nine. You're now drafted. What are your parents' reactions?

Phillips: Well, they expected me to go. They expected me to go the first time. I think they half expected that I wouldn't go the second time. They knew that when I didn't call them right away that this one was going to go. My dad had tried to tell me about it and some of my uncles and stuff like that.

¹¹ The Chicago Seven (originally Chicago Eight) were defendants charged by the federal government with conspiracy, inciting to riot, and other charges related to anti-Vietnam War and countercultural protests that took place in Chicago, Illinois, on the occasion of the 1968 Democratic National Convention. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chicago_Seven)

¹² Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), was an American student organization that flourished in the mid-to-late 1960s and was known for its activism against the Vietnam War. Initially, SDS chapters throughout the nation were involved in the civil rights movement. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Students-for-a-Democratic-Society>)

DePue: About being in the military?

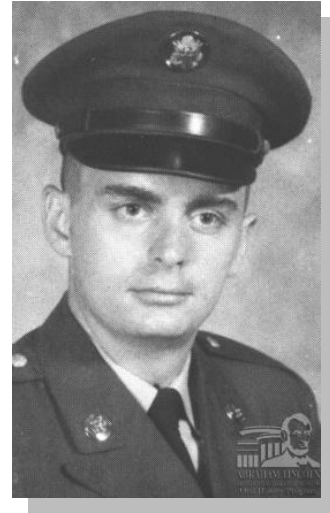
Phillips: Being in the military and stuff like that. It wasn't anything I envisioned. Our group from Chicago, the ones I went through chronologically at that time, were sent to Fort Polk, Louisiana. I can remember saying, "You're going to Fort Polk, Louisiana, by airplane." I thought, Fort Polk, Louisiana? I told you, I'd never really been in the Deep South before.

I knew there was a base in Missouri, Leonard Wood, and there were bases out east, Benning and all of those. I thought, Well, you know... even some in California, Fort Ord and stuff like that. Of course, I go to Fort Polk, Louisiana. I remember the sergeant saying, "Ooh." They didn't even like that place. So we get to Fort Polk, Louisiana, late at night. We're on a bus, and it was late at... I don't know, 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, we get there.

Sergeants get on the bus, the drill sergeants, and just start yelling at you, non-stop. I always found their repartee... The things they said were kind of cute. They were all canned, little one-liners. I tried to remember some of them because I thought, I've got to remember some of this stuff, because I'd never heard a lot (laughs) of the things. But it was pretty quick.

We were mixed with a bunch of kids from around there, around Louisiana. So part of us were from Louisiana, and the rest of us were from around Illinois and Chicago and so forth, there. Boy, that was oil and water there, because, as I mentioned yesterday, if you've ever watched this *Swamp People* TV special, that's about the kind of guys that those guys from Louisiana were.¹³

I asked many of them, I said, "What do you do for a living?" They would tell me, "I'm a coon ass." I thought, Wait a minute, that sounds like a bad name or something like that. I said, "What's a coon ass?" I said, "You hunt raccoons? Is that what you do?" "No, no, no. I hunt gators." I said, "Well, that's illegal." He said, "I know it is." I said, "How do you hunt a gator?" He said, "You get in this little flatboat; you get a baseball bat and a flashlight." I said, "A baseball bat and a flashlight?" He said, "Yeah. And then you go along in the water, and when you see one, you stick the flashlight on him, and he'll stop and look at you. Then, when you do that, you lean over and hit him on the head with the baseball bat." I said, "Okay. Let me get this



Bill Phillips' Basic Training photo, taken at Ft. Polk, Louisiana in June 1969.

¹³ *Swamp People* is an American reality TV series that was first broadcast in August 2010. The show follows the day-to-day activities of alligator hunters living in the swamps of the Atchafalaya River Basin who hunt American alligators for a living. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swamp_People)

straight. (laughs) You shine a flashlight in their eyes, and then you hit them on the head with a baseball bat and drag them in the boat.” “That’s it.”

I said, “That sounds a tad dangerous to me.” I said, “They probably willingly don’t jump in your boat, do they? Don’t you have to get out and get them sometimes?” He said, “Oh, yeah, we have to get out and get them sometimes.” I’m thinking, Whew. I half thought they were just...you know, pulling an old Yankee—they called me Yankee boy—Yankee boy, (both laugh) pulling my leg with some of that stuff.

There was a guy name Glenn Duhan. I’ll never forget Glenn Duhan. He was a big guy; he was a big gorilla. He was about six-four, six-five, a big burly guy. He could probably... I don’t know how much he could lift or whatever. He was strong, but he was dumber than a rock. He didn’t have one single social skill, so this stuff about tying you... He couldn’t tie his tie; he could not tie his tie. Yeah, he couldn’t tie his tie. He didn’t know how to do your boots really good, to shine them. He didn’t do the brass thing right. He couldn’t do that. He couldn’t make his bed very good.

So the sergeant assigned Glenn Duhan to me. He said, “Phillips, Duhan is yours. You show him everything he needs to do.” I’m thinking, That’s your job; that’s not **my** job. I’m just another one of these guys.

DePue: I hope you didn’t say that to the drill sergeant.

Phillips: No, no, no, (laughs) I didn’t say that. Glenn wasn’t real excited, so we became pretty good friends. Then, every night I’d have to tuck Glenn in bed, and every morning I’d have to make sure that he was somewhat presentable, with his boots shined and the rest of the things we were supposed to do. He was a mess. He just didn’t get it.

They were about to assign him to the goon platoon, which is a retreads; they were about to recycle him, which I knew would just be really bad news, because if he had to do this all over again, he’d flip out. So I helped him the last week. We got him through, and they didn’t assign him. That’s the name of the group, the retreads. They call them the goon platoon. I thought that was another one of those one-liners that I thought was real cute.

He finally graduated. His family came to the graduation, just like the *Beverly Hillbillies* [1962-1971 American TV sitcom about a southern hillbilly family].¹⁴ I swear, they came on a flatbed truck, and grandma was in a chair. It wasn’t a rocking chair. It was one of those chairs like you have in your front room, a padded chair like that, sitting on the back of a flatbed truck. The

¹⁴ *The Beverly Hillbillies* was an American sitcom television series originally broadcast on CBS from 1962 to 1971. The show had an ensemble cast that played the Clampetts, a poor backwoods family from the Ozarks region who move to posh Beverly Hills, California, after striking oil on their land. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Beverly_Hillbillies)

whole family was there, the sisters and all this. I thought, Man oh man. (laughs) They were—

DePue: Was Glenn a high school graduate?

Phillips: I'm not... I guess he was; I don't know. Maybe he wasn't. In those days there were some of them in there that had been given choices by judges. I think they'd had some youthful indiscretions of one kind or another. And instead of getting into really bad trouble, they [the judges] said, "You can go to jail or join the Army." I think Glenn was in that category. He decided to join the Army rather than go to jail for whatever it is he'd done. He didn't really mention it, but I think he got into an altercation with somebody and insulted something; I don't know.

DePue: Were you the rare bird in your platoon who was a college graduate?

Phillips: Oh, no. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure we had 40 percent of our guys in our company of 100 plus were college graduates. That was pretty unusual stuff for the military at that time. The reason they had all these guys was that they were just taking them right out of...as soon as they graduated from college, especially in June of sixty-nine. Right after they graduate, they're gone, just like me. Our particular group for a little while was a **lot** of college graduates.

DePue: I think if you were talking about sixty-seven or certainly sixty-six, marriage would have gotten you a deferment.

Phillips: Right. Graduate school wasn't going to do it, and being married wouldn't do it. Now, if I had a child, that would have done it, but that didn't come along until later. The college graduates, we were kind of an unusual group, and we kind of stuck together. We tried to stay in the back of the formations and just kind of go with the flow and not make any big deal about being a college graduate. Their favorite name for us was college pukes.

DePue: They being your fellow soldiers?

Phillips: The drill sergeants. The drill sergeants would call us, "All you college pukes can step out," and we knew that was going to be bad. They'd singled us out to do this or do that because they didn't care for us much at all. We didn't say anything or do anything, but they just didn't like us. So, we just tried to just go with the flow and don't say anything that would aggravate them.

DePue: When you first were drafted, were you all thinking that you're heading to the infantry?

Phillips: I think everybody kind of had that in mind. We knew that there was a half million soldiers in Vietnam, and we also knew that they rotated every year. So every year, you've got to have a half a million new people. I know some

people stayed over and some people... But you've got to have 400,000 new people, say, every other year. That's a lot of people to flow through the Army. I think we all figured we were going to Vietnam one way or another, and when you were in Fort Polk, that was the home of the infantry soldier at Tigerland.¹⁵ We figured, well, they're just going to graduate us and ship us down the street for advanced infantry training, and that will be that. And that did happen to most of them.

DePue: You said, to begin with, nobody seemed to like Fort Polk. How would you describe the place?

Phillips: The barracks were from World War II. They were two-story barracks, one big room, not a door in the place, other than in and out. The latrines—the word they use for the bathrooms—was just one big shower. Then they had like stools you sit on, with not a door in them, all around the side of the room. If you haven't done that, you haven't lived, with thirty other people in a trough to wash and shave or brush your teeth. And you all got to do this in about ten or fifteen minutes, unless you get up early, which I tried to do, because otherwise you didn't have time. The building was awful. It was sandy there. There wasn't a blade of grass in that Fort, I don't think, other than the general's lawn.

DePue: I had the impression it was wet and almost a jungle kind of environment, versus being dry.

Phillips: It was in certain places. Where we had our basic training company, it was just sandy. It was almost like... It was like swampy sand, that sort of stuff, no grass, nothing, no air conditioning. I don't think I ever saw air conditioning in basic training.



Private Phillips, attending a basic training class on field-stripping the M-14 rifle, June 1969.

I remember another cute little story. The mess cook, the head cook, was from Alabama. It was required, before you went into the mess hall, everybody had to stop at the door and sing one verse of *Dixie*, before you could go in, or you didn't eat.¹⁶ If you didn't sing one verse of *Dixie*, you weren't coming in. At first I thought, This is kind of silly. But that was what

¹⁵ In 1962, Fort Polk began converting to an advanced infantry training center. A small portion of Fort Polk is filled with dense, jungle-like vegetation. This, along with Louisiana's heat, humidity and precipitation, helped commanders acclimatize new infantry soldiers in preparation for combat in Vietnam. This training area became known as Tigerland. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fort_Polk)

¹⁶ *Dixie* is a popular song in the Southern United States. It is one of the most distinctively Southern musical products of the 19th century. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dixie_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dixie_(song)))

we had. So, everybody from New York or wherever, Chicago, sang one verse of *Dixie*. A lot of them had to learn a verse of Dixie to go in and eat. Then you had about ten minutes to eat. You were in and out of there just as fast...I still eat fast. To this day I eat fast because I'm afraid that I won't have time to eat it. (laughs) I don't know what the big rush was. I think they were just doing it to aggravate you.

That's an overwhelming memory of mine, is being hungry all the time. Of course, you're doing a lot of physical things, but I was hungry all the time. And, of course, you couldn't get anything else to eat. I was stuffing the food down just as fast as I possibly could. I used to be a picky eater, because basically I was treated like an only child at home because my brothers and sisters were all older, and they were gone. I learned a whole lot in the Army about not being a picky eater. Just eat it and go on.

DePue: Do you think that whole experience was effective in turning you into a soldier from a civilian?

Phillips: It was. It leveled me out. After you're in college for a while and you do pretty well and things like that... College for me wasn't real rigorous. I worked hard at it and made sure I did okay. I wasn't a straight "A" student or whatever, but I was good, and I knew what I had to do, and I did it, and I helped others do it. It **was** good for me, because you go into the Army, and they like to just level everybody out; everybody's the same. Glenn Duhan and me, we're the same. It did.

Looking back on it, there's a lot of silly things about it, like singing Dixie. I can remember the sergeants used to love to have us water the grass. I would say, "What grass? (DePue laughs) There isn't any grass." So, what we would do is, we would get our helmets, and fill it with water, and get it out and throw it into the sand around the barracks. We would do silly things like that all the time. Then we'd have... What do you call those things when you pick up cigarette butts... some kind of call?

DePue: Police call.

Phillips: Police call, yeah. We had innumerable of those. Of course you weren't allowed to smoke. You couldn't smoke. **They** did, but **we** didn't. We'd walk around the buildings and pick up anything we found. I don't know, just constant little things.

Then the sergeant came in one day, the drill sergeant, and he said, "I want to paint the inside of the barracks. We're going to have an inspection." I figured, Well, okay. Then he said, "The company fund is a little light." We needed to kick in some money to buy paint. I figured that was a little light on authenticity there, but I was going to kick in my \$5.00 or whatever it took. Lo and behold, we never got any paint and never painted the barracks. We did our

inspection without it and didn't say anything. (both laugh) Just go with the flow, you know, stuff like that.

DePue: He might have been painting his tonsils with some of that money.

Phillips: I imagine he was collecting some money. He was going out or whatever. But I knew enough not to... I could get by with losing five bucks and whatever.

I remember payday was interesting. You'd go up, and payday, they'd actually give you cash. You'd go up to where the company commander was, and you'd stand in line. They'd yell out your name and give you your pay. It wasn't a whole lot. If it was \$100, I'd be surprised. But they'd give it to you in cash. I thought, Well. So, you did have money, but you couldn't ever buy anything with it. I never got any place to buy anything with it. They stopped giving you cash, somewhere along the line in the Army when I was there.

DePue: If you watch the old movies, you'd say, there were probably a few poker games and crap games going on.

Phillips: Oh, yeah. I don't recall much of that, or I'd have been in them, believe me. I liked to do stuff like that. But I was too doggone tired when we were done. If I wasn't helping Glenn Duhan or whatever make his bed or shine his boots, I was just tired. So we didn't do a lot of that, and we never had time off. Even on weekends, they always seemed to fill us out.

We had one weekend where we got off from Saturday afternoon to Sunday at 6:00, and my wife drove down to visit me. I got Saturday night off; that was a real treat.

DePue: I didn't ask you what she thought about you going in the Army, right after you got married.

Phillips: Not much, not much at all. She wanted me to go to Canada. I said, "I'm not doing that. (laughs) No way am I doing that." She said, "You could get killed." I said, "Yeah, I know." But I said, "I'm not doing that." She was very passive and pacifist about that. She didn't care much for that at all, never did.

DePue: What happened after that? Where did you go for your specialty training?

Phillips: Right after that, I was assigned to Fort Sam Houston, to go to medical training. I remember talking to the company clerk before I left. I said, "Me and one other guy in the whole company were the only two that went to medical training, to be a medic." And I said, "Where's this medical stuff come in? I don't have any experience in medicine or anything like that." And the other guy didn't have a college degree. He was one of those guys from Louisiana. So having a degree didn't do it. He said, "They just see how many people they need and this and that." We had a couple guys that were truck

drivers and a couple of guys, they were clerks, and the rest of them went into the infantry, probably 90 percent.

DePue: What would you have preferred?

Phillips: I knew I wasn't hot for the infantry, so the medical thing kind of intrigued me. I said, "Well, I really don't know about that," but I thought, Well, I might make something out of this. That's a skill I didn't have or anything I knew about. But I certainly knew what it was going to be like to be in the infantry. I was glad I missed that bullet. That didn't bother me.

DePue: Did you understand at the time that, if you're a medic, you could well end up with the infantry?

Phillips: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah, I knew that. I knew that was a possibility, but I thought, Well, then again, there's other possibilities. Hospitals [have] got to have people. There's all kinds of medical people assigned to every kind of unit in the Army. No Army has... They all have medics, but they all kind of take them from the medical groups.

DePue: Did you know what your MOS [Military Occupational Specialty] was going to be at the time you left and headed for Fort Sam Houston?

Phillips: Yeah, 91A.

DePue: Which is medic.

Phillips: Right, basic medic. And then when you graduate, you're a 91B, not that that matters.

DePue: How was Fort Sam Houston different?

Phillips: Oh, that was infinitely better than Fort Polk, Louisiana, much more laid back. This is all medical people now. And the drill sergeants there were even more laid back. These weren't the hard-bitten infantry guys and whatever. And they weren't medics, either. They were just sergeants, just at random, I guess. But these weren't the hard-bitten ones, like the infantry ones were.

Then, when I first got there, before I was assigned to a class—that's what they called it. It was a class, not a group or a company or whatever—they had a meeting of all the college graduates that had come in the last few days. We went to the theater. This guy came out, dressed impeccably in this uniform, with a purple helmet. He was really what they call a STRAC soldier.¹⁷ He was...boots were shined to a gloss, poster boy. He said, "Now,

¹⁷ STRAC soldier is U.S. Army slang commonly used during the Vietnam War. It probably originated during World War II and stands for STRictly ACcording to regulations. (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=STRAC>)

you guys are all college graduates, and we just happen to need some people with some leadership skills.” He said, “If you’d like to volunteer to do some extra training, we’ll give you some extra privileges, like your own permanent pass. You could come and go and live off-post if you wanted and other things like that. You’d get some rank, and you don’t have to do all the junk details that everybody else might get, like food details and...”

DePue: KP [kitchen police].

Phillips: Yeah, all that. thought, Well, okay. So we did that. For two weeks we had special training, really to be a drill sergeant. It was compressed training for drill sergeants, was what it was. At the end... It was pretty rigorous. We’re up early, marching all the time. We had to learn how to do cadence and different things like that. We had to learn, basically, the routine for the classes and organization, because we really ran the classes. The regular sergeants, they just kind of just let us do it. Unless there was some problem, we didn’t even see them very much.

When we graduated, I remember, a bunch of us, like eight of us, seven of us, I don’t know, went to see this one sergeant. This was his class, and he said, “I’m looking for someone to be the class leader, which will be an E6.” He looked around and said, “Any volunteers?” I said, “I can do it.” He said, “You can do it?” I said, “Absolutely.” I was pretty confident of myself.

DePue: Hadn’t you already learned that you weren’t supposed to volunteer for anything?

Phillips: Yeah, I already had, but you know, if it’s a difference by me having a higher rank by just volunteering and not, I figured, I’m going to take a chance here. So I did. I was the class leader, and I had two E5s and four or five corporals, E4s. We weren’t really those ranks, but we wore those chevrons on our sleeves, and we had the purple helmet and all that. That was kind of cool. So, I got a pretty quick leadership course from the Army there.

The classes we went to were nothing like basic training. It was pretty seriously medical training of one kind or another, with combat wounds and diseases and learning all kinds of things. We had to give each other shots. I remember we were learning how to give each other shots, so we had to line up across from each other and let the guy across from you give you a shot. I’m thinking, Oh, man. I hope the guy across from me knows what he’s doing. Of course, he didn’t, because the skin is tougher than you think it is, so you don’t hit it hard enough. He didn’t hit it hard enough, and the needle just stuck in there and just fell down, still stuck in my arm. Then you’ve got to pull it out and do alcohol all over again, and do it again. We had to practice. Of course, we practiced on each other. But you made sure that there was no air bubbles in there and all that kind of stuff. I learned a lot of neat stuff in the military.

DePue: Was it somewhat intimidating to go through those classes, knowing that if you actually got into combat, you'd have peoples' lives in your hands?

Phillips: I think a lot of my colleagues didn't take it as serious as I did. I tended to take this more serious than basic training, reading a compass and shooting a rifle, which I already knew how to do and stuff. That was okay, but I thought this, Hey, I'm not driving a truck here. I've got to know this stuff, because some guy might die for something I didn't know. I took it pretty serious. I actually studied in the classes and listened to what they were trying to say and asked questions, just like I did in college. They didn't all do that, but a lot of them did.

We were all pretty doggone happy, I think, to be in the medical corps, even though we knew it was going to be a potentially bad job. There was the potential for it being a reasonable job. Being around a bunch of doctors... By the way, down there, that was where the basic training was for conscientious objectors too. All conscientious objectors went to Fort Sam Houston for basic training, because they all became medics. Every conscientious objector became medics, not to mention all the girls in the nursing program who were there. There was gaggle of them. (laughs) There was a gaggle of them. So, it wasn't too bad.

DePue: Were you close enough to the conscientious objectors to see how sincere and serious they were?

Phillips: No. We never mixed with them at all. They were completely separated. I think a lot of the guys didn't care much to be around them. I really don't know why. I thought it was a religious thing or whatever, but I think a lot of the guys just considered them to just be cowards, and they didn't want to associate with them. I ran into some in Vietnam, and I didn't know they were conscientious objectors until later. They didn't volunteer the information. They were just like us, except they wouldn't carry a gun. We did, and they didn't. That was the way to really determine those people.

DePue: What were you hearing about how dangerous the job of being a medic with a combat unit could be?

Phillips: A lot of the instructors were former medics from Vietnam who'd been there, and they were trying to tell us about it. They were trying to say, this is serious stuff. They said, "You're asked to have... Really, somebody's life is in your hands. They could actually live or die in your hands, based upon something you do or don't do." I took it very seriously, and I knew it could be a dangerous job, and there certainly were dangerous jobs, although, it was more dangerous than I thought it would be in training. It was more dangerous than I **ever** thought it would be. But I knew it would be dangerous.

DePue: How much were you hearing about what was going on in the war?

Phillips: We got a pretty good dose that, what was happening. Tet had already gone by, and we had the largest number of soldiers in sixty-nine there. We heard about Hill 101, Hamburger Hill with the 101st Airborne.¹⁸ I remember that battle and others. Our instructors in both basic and medic training, a lot of them were people back from Nam. They would try to tell us about it. Maybe they embellished it, I don't know. I can't say I wasn't afraid to go, but I sure didn't want to go. I thought, I've got a shot at getting a good job here.

DePue: You didn't want to go because you just didn't want to fight or because you thought it was the wrong war?

Phillips: No, no, I didn't care about that. I just didn't want to...I really didn't want to take the chance of getting killed.

DePue: At this time though, did you have any doubts about the validity of us being there?

Phillips: Not really. I knew that a lot of people didn't like the war, and I knew a lot of people were protesting it, especially students, but I thought that was kind of self-serving. I don't know if that's the right word or not, because they didn't want to go either. They were protesting it because of political reasons; we ought not to be there because it's a corrupt government. I've learned a lot more about it since then than then or before then.

I knew that we didn't seem to be winning. That was the most incredulous thing to me; why are we not winning? I couldn't imagine us not winning a war against a nation of that size. We're not fighting Russia here or China. We're fighting North Vietnam, half of a country. I barely knew some names, and I knew more than most as a history major. I knew about Vietnam, and I knew about the French being there in the early fifties. I knew about *Dien Bien Phu* and what happened to them, because I kind of studied about it.¹⁹ Of course, they lost, and they were a modern nation. They [the Vietnamese] beat the snot out of them. I thought, Ooh, this is not good. I just couldn't understand how we couldn't finish this thing.

DePue: Was Kathy able to come down to Fort Sam Houston?

Phillips: Yeah.

¹⁸ The Battle of Hamburger Hill was a battle of the Vietnam War that was fought by U.S. Army and Army of the Republic of Vietnam forces against People's Army of Vietnam forces from 10 to 20 May 1969. Although the heavily fortified Hill 937 was of little strategic value, U.S. command ordered its capture by a frontal assault, only to abandon it soon thereafter. The action caused a controversy both in the American military and public. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Hamburger_Hill)

¹⁹ The Battle of *Dien Bien Phu* was the climactic confrontation of the First Indochina War between the French Union's French Far East Expeditionary Corps and Viet Minh communist revolutionaries. The battle occurred between March and May 1954 and culminated in a comprehensive French defeat that influenced negotiations underway at Geneva among several nations over the future of Indochina. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Dien_Bien_Phu)

DePue: So you could live with her?

Phillips: Yeah, she was there. Yeah, we lived there. She got a job in a store down there, and we lived there during the training. On weekends, if I wasn't doing something on a Saturday and a Sunday I had off... It was pretty nice, medical training, almost like anything else, not like basic training. They treated you more as a person and as a professional rather than just a number or whatever.

DePue: Did you get leave?

Phillips: No. Well, wait a minute. I got leave after basic training, or after medical training before Vietnam. I got two weeks leave.

DePue: When was this?

Phillips: I would say it was late December of sixty-nine.

DePue: Did you and Kathy come back to Illinois?

Phillips: Yeah, we came back to Illinois. She was going to live with her parents.

DePue: When did you find out you were heading to Vietnam, after all of this?

Phillips: I knew that about two-thirds of the way through in medical training. They had basically split everybody up, [in]to the ones who were going to go to different things and the ones that were going to Vietnam. Vietnam probably had about 60 percent, maybe a little more than everybody, than the others. Some people would man hospitals in the States, the really lucky ones. Some went to Germany or Korea because all units needed medics.

DePue: Did you have some that definitely wanted to go to Vietnam?

Phillips: I don't remember anybody who wanted to go to Vietnam (both laugh). Later, when I was in Vietnam, I had some people who liked it and wanted to stay and would re-up, and they did re-up. I saw that. I couldn't believe that, but they did. They liked that stuff.

DePue: What was the plan for Kathy, once you both knew you were heading to Vietnam?

Phillips: She was going to go home and live with her parents, and she was going to try to get a teaching job, since she had her degree now and her certificate. If not, she was a home ec [economics] major, and she would get a job in a... I think she was looking for a job in a sewing store, to teach sewing or something like that, even be a waitress, maybe; I don't know.

DePue: Was there any discussion about starting a family?

Phillips: No. We talked about it, but I said, "Now's not really a good time. Let's really talk about that when I get back," and so on and so forth. So I said, "This is not a good time."

DePue: It sounds like she was concerned that you'd ever make it back.

Phillips: I think she was. I was concerned I wasn't going to make it back. You just don't know. That's the problem; it's the unknown. I think I was more scared of being maimed or disabled than being killed. Being killed, you know (claps hands), dead. Of course, that's not the way it really happens, most times anyway.

DePue: As a medic, you're going to learn that the hard way.

Phillips: That's right. I didn't know that, but I was afraid of having my leg blown off or two legs blown off or lose my sight. Those sorts of things just wear on you, not the one where you're "bop" dead; that's it. When you go to war, you just don't know what you're going to see and face. You just don't have a clue. I don't care what kind of training you had, and I was pretty historically oriented, military history. I knew about stuff like that. But knowing about it and being there is different.

DePue: When did you deploy, and how did you get there?

Phillips: I went in early January. I think it was the day or so after New Year's Day. I went to California, to Oakland base, whatever they called that [Oakland Army Base]. It was the staging area, basically for everybody going to Vietnam. They took your regular clothes and gave you all jungle kit, jungle uniforms, jungle boots, and so on and so forth. That's a good day or so. Then you get on a plane, and you go across. We went to...Let's see, from there to Okinawa, stopped there, and then we went to Saigon. I think there was one stopover.

DePue: Did you go commercial?

Phillips: It was a commercial plane, but it was a chartered flight. It was all military. It wasn't American Airlines or something like that, but it was a charter flight to go to Vietnam. They must have made some sort of deal with them.

DePue: But stewardesses?

Phillips: We had stewardesses, no drinks. They'd give you a coke and all that, but no liquor (laughs). They wouldn't give you any of that.

DePue: What was it like on that aircraft?

Phillips: Everybody's just sitting and thinking. There were some people who were reading, and some were laughing, and some were talking about it. Some guys had big talk; "I'm going to do this. I'm going to do that." And some guys

were just...they weren't crying, but they were just so morose. They were just, "Oh, my gosh." And me? I didn't know what to expect. I just didn't know. It was completely unknown. But I had some experience with that, going to Norway.

DePue: But you had to think this could be quite a bit different from going to Norway.

Phillips: Yeah, this is going to be a different deal. We get there, and you get off of the plane, and just a blast of heat hits you. It is "whew." I thought, Holy smokes. This place is hot. Let me tell you, it was hot. You get your gear, and they sort of shuffle you around. You go to the first big repo depot they call it. A repo depot's a replacement place.

The first thing you do is you have your orders in a big folder, and you go there, and you stand in line, and you stand in line. You give them your orders. Then they shuffle you off to infantry, medics, artillery, whatever in this big room.

I went over to the medics table, and I was standing there. There you're assigned to a division in Vietnam. I'm not quite sure how many divisions there were, maybe fifteen divisions there? I don't know, different ones. Some I'd been familiar with. I was familiar with the 101st Airborne; I was familiar with 82nd Airborne; I was familiar with Big Red One. I wasn't familiar with the 25th Division of Tropic Lightning. I'd never seen them. They were from Hawaii, and then the cavalry groups, 11th Armored Cav; I'd never seen them before.

I was assigned to the 4th Infantry Division, which was in the middle of the country, not in the rice paddies, although, we saw some, not many of them, and it was kind of mountainous. I'd heard of the IV Division or Big Red One. What do they call them in Afghanistan? They call them the 4th ID now, but we never used that term.

DePue: ID standing for Infantry Division.

Phillips: Right, right. I was there a couple of days, and then I went by airplane to Pleiku, which was the division base camp at the time. We got out of there. You get on trucks and blah, blah, blah. Then we go to the repot depo for the 4th Division, yeah, in the middle of the country.



"Upon arriving in Vietnam, all of the soldiers' American money was taken, except pennies. The money given to them in return was called Military Payment Certificates. There were different bills for all denominations."

DePue: We've got a map here. This is in II Corps²⁰ area, central highlands area?

Phillips: Uh-huh. Now Qui Nhon was a place we went all the time, right here.

DePue: Right on the ocean.

Phillips: Yeah. There was a road there called Highway 19, between Qui Nhon—somewhere along there—to Pleiku. That was the main resupply avenue for Pleiku, other than airplanes. Somewhere in the middle there is the Ming Yang Pass, which I'd actually remembered, somewhere in the middle.

DePue: What the name of it again?

Phillips: Ming Yang Pass. I remembered it from the French War because the first time I passed through the Ming Yang Pass on a truck, they had a huge white cross up on the top of a mountain. I said, "What's that for?" They said, "That's where the 1,000 Frenchmen they buried there, after they were all ambushed in the Ming Yang Pass, which you're going through right now." I said, "Oh, really?" "Yeah." They had the big cross, which you saw every time you went up and down the highway, where they'd ambushed a big armored column of French soldiers during that war. They killed about 1,000 of them. That was a famous battle. I looked it up. That was the real thing; it really happened. If you look at the movie *We Were Soldiers*, that first opening session is about that.²¹ What they did was, they would stop the first vehicle and the last vehicle on the road, and then nobody could get around them. Then they'd just move in on you.

DePue: I saw that, the first episode, or the first?

Phillips: The first part of the movie, *We Were Soldiers*.

DePue: It was about the French being ambushed?

Phillips: Yeah, right.

DePue: Because this is a story about one of the first American units in Vietnam.

²⁰ The II Corps was a corps-sized formation of the United States Army that was active in both World War I and World War II. It was originally formed and fought on the Western Front during World War I and was also the first American formation of any size to see combat in North Africa or Europe during World War II. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/II_Corps_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/II_Corps_(United_States)))

²¹ A French unit on patrol in Vietnam in 1954, the final year of the First Indochina War, is ambushed by Viet Minh forces, probably the Battle of Mang Yang Pass. The Viet Minh commander orders his soldiers to "kill all they send, and they will stop coming." Eleven years later, the United States is fighting the Vietnam War. *We Were Soldiers* was a book and then a movie about the first major battle of the American phase of the Vietnam War and the soldiers on both sides that fought it. (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0277434/>)

Phillips: Yeah, that's true. But the guy who was the commander had studied the French War because he wanted to know how these people were fighting. I just remember that little episode, but that is exactly where we would go all the time, was through this pass. It was high mountains up on both sides, and you're just kind of snaking right through it. It wasn't very hard for them to be shooting at you from the mountain tops and move in.

DePue: What was the vegetation like in that area?

Phillips: We tried to move the vegetation back from the road, with graders and stuff, as much as we could.

DePue: You always hear about triple canopy jungle.

Phillips: That I saw in the infantry. Triple canopy jungle simply means that the trees are growing together on top. It actually blocks out the light; it becomes fairly shaded there because it blocks it out.

DePue: But that wasn't necessarily the vegetation around Pleiku and the central highlands?

Phillips: No. But if you got into the mountains, you would see that, which we did.

DePue: You talked about getting to the 4th ID and then going through the repo depot there again. Pick it up from there.

Phillips: After the repo depot, I was assigned to an armor battalion. I was really surprised at that. I knew there weren't many armor battalions in Vietnam. There were tanks there but not a lot of tanks. There were more APCs [armored personnel carriers] than tanks. It's not like you're in the Libyan Desert or something like that. The tanks were mainly stuck on the roads. They couldn't go into the rice paddies. Sometimes it was difficult for them to just go banging through the jungle. They could knock over a lot of trees, but if you had a tree that was two foot in diameter, that might slow your tank down (laughs). So we tended to stay on the roads all the time.

DePue: What was the unit?

Phillips: 1st Battalion, 69th Armor.

DePue: Were you signed on to a company?

Phillips: Yeah, Headquarters Company. The Headquarters Company had their own little group of tanks. Then we had... They called them a platoon, A, B, C, D, I think. Then there was a scout platoon. What was their name? I have a patch from them...Kit Carson Scouts or some sort of scouts. But hey would go on APCs and kind of check the territory out before they'd send tanks in and stuff like that. Those were the real gung-ho guys. Those were the—

DePue: The scouts.

Phillips: Yeah (laughs). Those were the guys who'd been there a while and knew the most about what was going on there.

DePue: My understanding is the scouts are something like an armored unit or a mechanized infantry unit. They would be a little bit lighter. Their job wasn't necessarily to go into heavy combat, but it was to find where the enemy was.

Phillips: Right, right. You're talking about LRRPs, too, and stuff like that, which I ran into later, which is long range patrols or long-range penetration.

DePue: Long rang reconnaissance patrol, I think it is.

Phillips: LRRP? Those were guys who would just basically go into the jungle and look and listen and really avoided contact. Then we had—what was it? —another group of like ranger-type people, who we ran across and so forth, that would do that same kind of thing. They would go in and just look and listen and really avoid contact if they could, because there weren't very many of them. A LRRP group only had, I think, four people. They were not a big group of people. These scouts, this was like a platoon, twenty-five, thirty of them.

DePue: And they were part of the battalion, correct?

Phillips: Yeah, they were part of our armor battalion.

DePue: What platoon were you assigned to then in the headquarters?

Phillips: In the Headquarters Group they would assign me to whoever needed it at the time, at first.

DePue: So you could be going out with one of the line companies?

Phillips: I went out with the ARVNs [Army of the Republic of Viet Nam] a couple of times, which is the South Vietnamese, because they didn't have **any** medics. And then the Koreans, I went out with the Koreans sometimes and the different groups. It depended on what they were doing. It seemed like one of the platoons was always back in the rear, with their vehicles being under repair.

DePue: Tell me about your first impressions of going out with the ARVN.

Phillips: Not too positive, really. The ARVN soldiers would steal from us. They would steal your food or your ammo or watches or whatever. In actual combat situations, they were not aggressive. They didn't do the things we did. They didn't speak our language, and we didn't have very many people that could speak very much Vietnamese. It was pretty plain to us that they tolerated us

but didn't like us, which always bothered us and me. This is your country; it's not **my** country.

DePue: Were they committed to winning?

Phillips: I don't think so. They were committed to surviving. There were some; there were some small units and some people who were good soldiers and did their job and were aggressive about doing something. It just seems that every opportunity they had to not do anything or not put themselves in any sort of situation that could be dangerous, they took advantage of. I personally didn't trust them a whole lot, but they were very good for me and good to me, because they needed me, as a medic; they didn't have anybody. When they had to call in choppers or something like that, I had to do it, because I spoke English. Sometimes they had an American advisor with them, a Green Beret or something like that, not always.²²

DePue: Were you eating their food when you were with them?

Phillips: No. Never did.

DePue: You ate C-rations.

Phillips: Yeah, (both laugh) absolutely. Or if I was in the back, we had food at the mess hall or mess tent or whatever. But I didn't eat their food; I didn't eat hardly any of their food.

DePue: How about the Koreans? Did you go out with them?

Phillips: A couple of times I went out with the Koreans, good soldiers, just meaner than snot. These were professional soldiers. It's not like the ARVNs, who they dragged out of some hamlet somewhere and put a gun in his hand. These guys were professionals. They joined the army, and they didn't like Communists. They didn't even like the Vietnamese. They looked down on them. They thought they were crappy soldiers and weren't aggressive, and they weren't. They [the Koreans] were; Koreans were no-nonsense.

DePue: Do you think that they had a reputation with the enemy as well?

Phillips: Yes. Yes, they did. We captured some of the enemy, not too many, but occasionally. If the Koreans...they would make it known, that the Koreans were coming...

²² The United States Army Special Forces, colloquially known as the Green Berets, due to their distinctive service headgear, are a special operations force of the United States Army tasked with five primary missions: unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, special reconnaissance, direct action and counter-terrorism. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special_Forces_\(United_States_Army\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Special_Forces_(United_States_Army)))

I remember once in a tank platoon... We were in a hilltop, in a little valley; the enemy soldiers were there. And the Koreans, they told them with a bullhorn or whatever, a loudspeaker. They said, "We're the Korean's Tiger Division"—whatever; I don't know—"And we're coming down there." You could sort of see them scurrying around, trying to get away because they didn't want anything to do with the Koreans. Koreans, number one, they didn't take many prisoners. We wanted them to take prisoners so we could talk to them, but they didn't. They were aggressive soldiers, aggressive, probably even more aggressive than we were. They were professional soldiers. I wasn't a professional soldier.



Bill Phillips is holding a 45 caliber "grease gun" or submachine gun, standard armament for members of a tank crew. This was January 1970, when Phillips was assigned as a platoon medic for the 1st Battalion, 69th Armor, in Pleiku, Vietnam.

DePue: What was the unit's equipment? You said they had tanks, what kind of tanks?

Phillips: M60 Abrams tanks, big ones.²³

DePue: Patton, I think.

Phillips: Whatever. I don't know. It was M60; I remember that. We had a big light on the front, where we could—

DePue: Searchlight.

Phillips: Searchlight, yeah. We had a 50-caliber machine gun on top. We had a machine gun inside. We had a tank commander; we had a driver; we had a gunner, sometimes a mechanic. We kind of shared him, and then they shared me. You'd think everybody would ride inside of a tank, but you really don't. That's not a good place to be. The only time you really got in the tanks was if there was a firefight, and they were shooting rifles at you, then you were safe inside. But if you thought that there was danger, you wanted to be on the outside of the tank, not on the inside, because if you ran over what was really dangerous for us, which was those mines, it'd just blow you off the tank, and you'd go flying.

²³ The M60 Patton is an American second-generation main battle tank (MBT) introduced in December 1960. Although developed from the M48 Patton, the M60 series was never *officially* classified as a Patton tank, but as a "product-improved descendant" of the Patton series. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M60_Patton)

DePue: Wouldn't it be safer on the inside of the tank?

Phillips: No, because then you'd be rattling around inside the tank. If you were inside the tank, like the driver had to be, and you run over one of those mines, you were pretty well assured you were going to be gone, even with a seatbelt and stuff like that. It was much more dangerous to be in a tank and hotter too. [whistles] Was it hot! (laughs)

DePue: You went out on missions with an armor platoon; was it one medic per platoon, generally?

Phillips: Yeah.

DePue: How many tanks in the platoon?

Phillips: Usually at least four, sometimes five. Occasionally another tank would go with us, with the company commander or something like that, occasionally.

DePue: So, four men in the tank crew?

Phillips: Uh-huh.

DePue: And then several of them would have the mechanic, the medic.

Phillips: Yeah, there were three for every tank, and then the mechanic was... They would have somebody there, and they kind of shared him because every tank didn't need a mechanic and stuff like that. They would have a tank commander, a driver, and a gunner. Then the gunner would shoot the machine gun inside, if that was necessary, and the tank commander or the gunner would shoot the one on top, if that was necessary. Then the gunner would load it and kind of aim it, and the tank commander would assess the situation, either inside or outside of the tank. In other words, fire it from the inside—you could do that—or fire it from the outside.

DePue: Anybody who has some basic understanding of the kind of combat you had in Vietnam is going to be surprised, first of all, about tanks over there. I've got to believe that the enemy had no tanks.

Phillips: In fact, the First 69th Armor had the only tank to take combat in Vietnam. It was at a place called Ben Het, which was somewhere very close to the border. It was like one of those fire bases, like five or six miles from the border.

DePue: Of Laos or of Cambodia?

Phillips: I'm not sure, wherever Ben Het is.²⁴ I thought it was somewhere around Pleiku. Anyway, there was a armor platoon there that night, and across the border six Russian PT76 amphibious tanks came over. I don't think they knew our tanks were there, so they ran into them. That was the only tank to tank combat in the whole Vietnam War was that time, one and only. That was it.

DePue: Was that before, during or after?

Phillips: That was before me. That was like sixty-eight. But we were famous. We had pictures of it (laughs). There were tanks we blew up and stuff like that.

DePue: The PT76 is a lighter tank. It wouldn't have stood up very well under attack.

Phillips: It didn't. It didn't. It was made to...amphibious. Certainly our tanks were not amphibious, so I knew it had to be fairly lightweight or something like that. You button it up, and you can actually drive on a riverbed or whatever they did. I'm not sure.

DePue: But otherwise, my understanding is this is an overwhelmingly light infantry war. Tell me about the mission of these armor platoons.

Phillips: The mission of our platoon was generally road security. I mentioned Highway 19, between Pleiku and Qui Nhon. The supplies would come in at Qui Nhon, and they'd go with huge convoys to Pleiku and then later, Ahn Khe, after Pleiku. I'm looking for that. I thought it was on the way. I don't see it.



This was one of our tanks on duty guarding this bridge. Obviously, they were a little late.

Anyway, the tanks would sort of sit beside the road or on bridges, which were important targets for security because every doggone bridge we had,

they'd blow it up at night. We'd bring the tanks in at night. They didn't leave them out there. Occasionally we left them out there, and we went into like a wagon train situation. We'd go around and around and stuff like that. I saw probably the least action with the armor unit than I did of any of the others. We had some deployments, not a whole lot. They stayed away from us, and

²⁴ Ben Het was strategically important because it was located seven miles east of the point where Laos, Cambodia and South Vietnam conjoined. (<https://specialoperations.com/31123/battle-ben-het-special-forces-camp-june-231969/>)

we didn't go crashing through the jungle too much. Basically it was road security; that's what we did.

DePue: I know you've got to get to a meeting here. I'm going to finish with this question, and then we'll pick it up some other time. Tell me about the nature of the enemy you faced.

Phillips: Well, two kinds. First of all, there were the local VC [Viet Cong] units, and they had the black silk pajamas. They really did wear those things, and they had those silly conical hats that they would wear. They really wore those.

Then they had what I think was a really marvelous invention. I don't know who invented this, but these Ho Chi Minh sandals. It's a sandal made out of old tires. They would cut up the tire, and they would make the sandals out of them. There was no leather or anything; it was all made out of rubber. Of course, you can be wet twenty-four hours a day with rubber and not hurt it, and they were. So that was one heck of an invention. I don't know who did that.

Those guys were not as well armed as the NVA [North Vietnamese Army] units that we faced, the different regiments or this and that. There were some good ones, but normally the VC lived in the villages and would just get together on various missions. They used them for recon [reconnaissance], for us to tell them who's going where and that sorts of things. You try to figure out who was VC, when you go to these villages, which was difficult. They all had government ID cards.

But we didn't see a whole lot of young men because they were either in the ARVN army—they took them—or the VC would come at night and take all the young men. They'd put them in their group or whatever. So young men were virtually unheard of. In fact, if you saw a young man, (laughs) you knew something was up.

But the NVA units, certain regiments and this and that, they were very good soldiers. They weren't heavily armed but well-armed. They all carried either an AK or a SKS [rifle], which is a semi-automatic version. They would have three or four clips, not a lot of ammo, like we carried. They would have some rice. They would have a hammock a lot—I had one for a long time. It was just a little bitty thing, folded up, just a little hammock—and they'd sleep in that, maybe a little poncho type thing for the rain, and that was it, virtually no medical group. Occasionally they might have medical supplies.

If you got wounded and you were one of them, pretty well figure you're going to catch it. They didn't want us to find the bodies, but getting back to someone who can actually take care of you might...it would take too long for them to do that. So you were pretty well dead if you got wounded to any extent.

DePue: Did you have any Montagnards you were working with?²⁵

Phillips: Oh, yeah. We went through some Montagnard villages, and the people were nice. They were very nice. They liked us, and they didn't like the Vietnamese. So the Vietnamese hated them. The Montagnards are sort of like [native American] Indians. If you had to compare them to anything, they'd be Vietnamese Indians because they were very primitive people. They were always eating these beetle nuts, and their teeth were black. You eat that for a while, your teeth just fall out. Of course, there were some other things, some leaves that they'd chew on, which I think was cocaine or whatever. It would give you strength, and it was a stimulant. They'd chew on that stuff. Basically, they had a loin cloth, lived in these little villages. They were lucky if they had a water buffalo or a pig or whatever.

DePue: Did they speak the same language?

Phillips: No, they didn't. They didn't speak Vietnamese. Some did. Some of them went to the government schools, but they had their own language. We liked them. Vietnamese didn't like them, not North Vietnamese or South Vietnamese. They didn't like them. ARVNs hated them. There **were** some military units with Montagnards in them; they were great scouts. The problem in Vietnam was, we didn't know where they were, just like the Indians. But they knew where we were.

DePue: You didn't know where the NVA and the VC were?

Phillips: Yeah, we had no idea where they were, so we were chasing them all the time. But the Montagnards did.

DePue: That's probably a decent place for us to stop today, pretty fascinating. But we've got quite a bit more to talk about in your Vietnam experiences. I'm looking forward to the next session.

Phillips: Okay. Thank you.

(end of transcript # 1)

²⁵ The native inhabitants of the Central Highlands are the Degar (Montagnard) peoples. The Montagnards have fought against and resisted all Vietnamese invaders, from the anti-Communist South Vietnamese government, the Vietcong, to the Communist government of unified Vietnam. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Degar>)

Interview with William "Bill" Phillips

VRV-A-L-2013-019

Interview # 2: April 2, 2013

Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. "Fair use" criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Tuesday, April 2, 2013. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I have my second session with Bill Phillips. Good morning, Bill.

Phillips: Good morning.

DePue: And tell us exactly where we are, Bill.

Phillips: We are at the office for the Illinois Association of School Administrators in Springfield, which is the professional association for school superintendents.

DePue: And as a former superintendent, what's your title here?

Phillips: I am a field service director. There are three of us. We are spread out throughout the state, and we mentor new superintendents in the state of Illinois. I personally have about twenty-five superintendents that I officially mentor and probably, unofficially, more than that. So I travel around the state and visit my mentees and their different regions. I have seven regions of the state that I cover, as far as going to superintendent regional meetings and meeting with them.

DePue: Is this the central part of the state?

Phillips: Well, this is, but my regions go all the way from Sangamon County north, except for Cook and the collar counties. They have a separate person to do that.

- DePue: So the Cook County superintendents and the Chicago superintendents are also part of the system?
- Phillips: Not District 299.
- DePue: I take it that's Chicago?
- Phillips: Cook County, yes. Cook County has 147 school districts itself, and there are a lot of districts in Lake, DuPage, Will, those counties. They have their own person up there. Actually, the superintendents outside of Cook and the collar counties don't get together as often as probably the others.
- DePue: How about Chicago itself. Is it part of this network?
- Phillips: District 299 is not part of this network. They have a CEO [chief executive officer].
- DePue: Chicago is always separate from the rest of the state.
- Phillips: They have their own laws, really, that the legislature makes. They write laws that they say are only for districts of more than 500,000, which is Chicago. They have their own retirement system, everything, separate.
- DePue: Let's get back to Vietnam. When we finished off last time, you were just finishing a tour in Vietnam, and I think you're going to get transferred to the Medical Evacuation Hospital in Pleiku.
- Phillips: Uh-huh. That basically was sort of a mid-step. I was assigned to the hospital. I really thought I would be working in the hospital itself, but what I found was since I'd been a combat medic, they farmed them out to the helicopter company for "dust off" medics. "Dust off" was the radio call sign—it was pretty standard—for the Huey helicopters that would go and get people that were wounded in the field.
- DePue: Why were you transferred?
- Phillips: The tanks had been decommissioned. The entire battalion of tanks was decommissioned. They brought all the tanks in and sent them home. So everyone that had a little time left in Vietnam was either sent home or reassigned to someplace else in Vietnam. That's what happened to me. I was reassigned to this hospital.
- DePue: What month was that? Do you remember?
- Phillips: No, I really don't. It was in the spring.

DePue: Well, you had more than a little time left, didn't you?

Phillips: Oh yeah. That's the reason I was reassigned. If I'd have had less than three or four months, they would have just sent me home to let me finish my tour there. But since I had so much time left, they just reassigned me somewhere else.



The aero medical helicopters, in the process of loading wounded soldiers. For a period, Phillips was assigned as a dust off medic and served as a crew member and a medic on helicopter dust off helicopters.

I was reassigned to the hospital, and then immediately they latched on to me to do the dust off duty, which means that... The helicopter would land right next to the hospital. The pads were right there, so I would just go out, especially the dust off helicopters. I'm trying to think of the name. Maybe Camp Holloway was where the dust off helicopters were stationed. But they would come over and get me in the morning. Sometimes I would go over there.

DePue: What did you think about being a medic on a chopper?

Phillips: Well, my initial impression was... I thought it would be okay because you got to sleep in a bed at night. We didn't have to either sleep in or around a tank or whatever. And flying was kind of exciting; I have to say that. I hadn't spent much time in a helicopter, a little.

But I later found out that the helicopters were made of aluminum, and there was virtually nothing armored in a helicopter except the pilots' seats. So bullets coming from the bottom or the side or the front or whatever would just go right through those things. You had virtually no armor protection. And in our particular job we had to go in and get wounded soldiers, sometimes in the middle of firefights. We would land...

If they would pop red smoke, they would tell us that there's enemy action close, and then the pilot would decide whether or not we would go in. Most of the time we would land or close to landing. If it was like over rice paddies, he wouldn't land, but he would hover very close to the ground, and they would bring out the wounded person. Sometimes I would have to go out and help them.

The ones that were probably the scariest for me was when we were hovering over trees, and we couldn't land at all because there was no landing area anywhere close, which was kind of common. So we would send down a jungle penetrator, which is sort of like a hook, if you will, and it would go down through the trees. Then it would open up, and they would put the wounded soldier on there, and then we'd winch him up.

DePue: Through the branches.

Phillips: Through the branches. Occasionally we had a...it was like where they could lay down, if they were that bad, and they couldn't do that. And occasionally I would have to go down too. I would have to go down first, get this all set. Then, of course, all this time you're just hovering over a tree, making a lot of noise, and you're a heck of a good target, just sitting there real low.

DePue: Were the aircraft marked at all with a red cross or anything?

Phillips: Oh, yeah. Well, you'll see in some of my pictures that some of them did; they had a red cross on there. But as time went on, they decided not to do that because it just marked you as a dust-off chopper, and they liked to shoot down... Well they liked to shoot down any chopper, but they knew we would have to come in a hover in dangerous places, whereas the resupply choppers would just come in, kick off their supplies, maybe pick somebody up, and then just take right off, where we might have to stay there for a few minutes.

DePue: To shoot at a helicopter that's marked as a medevac helicopter, isn't that a war crime? Isn't it against the Geneva Convention?

Phillips: I doubt if those fellas were reading any books along that line because they would shoot at anything, just virtually anything. You wouldn't think that a lot of times our choppers were armed, but they were. They were armed just like other Huey choppers. We had two sixty caliber



Huey helicopters were the standard dust off choppers in all of Vietnam. They were prominently marked as such, but that certainly didn't stop enemy fire.

machineguns, one on each side. When I wasn't doing something medically, I would have to operate the machinegun, just in case. But normally I was busy doing that [medical work], and if there was any of that [shooting] going on, the crew chief, who was on the other side, he would be doing that [operating the machine gun.]

DePue: Did it make any difference, NVA or Viet Cong, whether or not they fired at you?

Phillips: No, absolutely not, not that we saw. (laughs)

DePue: What was the crew then, the pilot, the co-pilot, the crew chief and you?

Phillips: Right. Yeah.

DePue: Just one medic?

Phillips: Yeah.

DePue: How many casualties could you put on the helicopter?

Phillips: If they were all laying down, and we had a chopper that had cots. Some of them had cots; it was like bunk beds. We could get three in that and then probably two or three others, laying on the floor. So five or six would be our maximum, unless they were kind of walking wounded, which wasn't too common, really, but we did that. In other words, you were wounded, but you could still walk out or something like that. We could get more on with that.

You have to remember that in Vietnam you didn't get in a helicopter and strap yourself in and shut the door and all that business. The doors were actually taken off the helicopter. There were no doors, except the pilot and co-pilot had this small door. Later, when I was assigned to the infantry, you would just sit on the edge of the helicopter, with your feet dangling over the side. That's what you did. You had to get in and out fast. Speed was of the essence.

The pilots didn't want to linger too long. A lot of times they would linger above the ground, and you'd



Phillips turned around and took this picture after just getting off this helicopter. You will note that the helicopter did not land because the terrain was unknown, so they had to jump out.

just have to jump off, ten or fifteen feet, whatever. They used to have something called elephant grass, which is very tall grass, and they really didn't know what was on the bottom because you couldn't see. So they'd hover over the top of the elephant grass, then you'd have to jump out. Occasionally I had to do that with dust offs too because wide open areas to land a helicopter were kind of at a premium in the jungle. If they were, they were heavily booby trapped and stuff like that because they knew we were going to end up there sooner or later.

DePue: You had to put an awful lot of faith in those pilots.

Phillips: Oh, I did. I didn't always have the same set of pilots, but I had a group of them. I wasn't assigned to one helicopter all the time. But they were good. They were young men. I was actually older than most of the pilots. They were nineteen, twenty years old.

DePue: What's the profile for somebody to be a good medevac pilot?

Phillips: I thought the medevac pilots really were the cream of the crop. There were three kinds of helicopters and pilots. One was the gunships, either a Huey gunship that had had been converted to a gunship or the new ones. I forget the ones that were real thin and so forth and just made to be a gunship.

DePue: The Cobra gunship.

Phillips: The Cobra gunship, right. Those guys, they had a lot more protection and had less to fear than the other kind. The second kind was just a normal supply helicopter, the ones that would take the troops from here and there. You have to remember that very few times would we ever go anywhere by truck or road or anything like that. When we went from place to place, we went by helicopter in a big group or a little group. Now those pilots were good pilots too, but the medevac pilots seemed to have to have the most fearlessness or the most drive and determination of all of them because they had to go where they **knew** there was going to be a problem.

They were also the most highly motivated because you knew you were going in there to get someone to help them. We could have soldiers in and out of a hot zone in ten or fifteen minutes. It depends on how far we were away from the medevac, the hospitals. We always took them to either Pleiku or Qui Nhon or Ahn Khe. All three of them had some kind of hospital. Pleiku had the biggest one. We would drop them off, and they would come and get them when we would land. But those pilots, they were the bravest of the brave because they... They would go in at night, and that was almost unheard of, to go in at night with lights and stuff like that. That's dangerous.

DePue: Doesn't that make you and the crew chief the bravest of the brave as well?

Phillips: (both laugh) I didn't sign up to be the bravest of the brave. My goal was to help the guys and do what I had to do. If I had to go down and get them because they didn't know how to manage the jungle penetrator or they needed to stabilize him right away; he was fading very quickly, and maybe they had no medics on the ground, or maybe they did. I don't know. But you just do your job and try not to think about it. But I can tell you, hovering over those trees, just sitting there waiting for someone to shoot at you—and they did—was a heck of a cold feeling.

DePue: Did you ever take some rounds into the helicopter?

Phillips: Oh sure, (laughs) certainly. I took one, not two or three inches from me. There's no armor back where we would sit, so when I had a chance, I had a piece of steel about an inch thick, cut. I would carry it with me because they didn't leave them on the helicopter; I wasn't on the same one all the time. So I would just take my little piece of steel and sit on it, in case the bullets came directly from below, directly from below, and they would.

The thing that I learned to fear was not so much to hit the motor. The pilots were in armored seats, and unless they [the enemy] were coming dead on, they [the pilots] were fairly well protected. But [what I feared] was to hit the rear rotor, the little one on the back, which stabilized the helicopter. If that happened, then you'd just spin around and around on the big one, faster and faster. That was very dangerous, to hit the little rotor in the back. If they hit the big rotor, we could auto rotate down to the ground, which is sort of like floating like a butterfly down. We had that happen once. And then once, the motor failed on us as we were taking off, and we auto rotated back down to the ground.

DePue: Hit pretty hard I would think.

Phillips: Not too bad. It didn't roll it over or anything like that. I did see helicopters shot down. In fact, my best friend was killed in a helicopter.

DePue: Can you tell us more about that incident?

Phillips: That incident is sort of my guardian angel story. That's the one I told you about [that] I wrote for a magazine. We were somewhere—this was when I was later with the infantry—and one of my



During Phillips' entire tour in Vietnam, Bob Hill (left) was his closest friend. Hill was later killed in a helicopter crash. Phillips went to the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. to find his name.

best friends in the infantry company was a fella named Bob Hill. He was a school teacher, like me, from Iowa, Cedar Rapids. We became friends. He was a radioman for a lieutenant, a platoon leader. We would talk all the time about home and teaching school; he was a history teacher. Not that I liked the military, I accepted it, and I tried to do the very best I could, and I didn't... He didn't. He just disliked it from the get-go, and he was always very outspoken in criticism. He was always getting in a scrape or two.

Anyway, one morning we were going on some sort of operation, and the helicopters were coming in, one at a time. That's all they could land at a time, was one at a time. We were kind of on a hillside. I was not supposed to travel with Bob and his platoon because I was the chief medic, and I was supposed to be with the company commander all the time. We were standing there talking, and the helicopter came in and landed. Bob said, "Come on with us. Come on with us." So I went over to the helicopter, and I sat on it, as it was getting ready to take off.

I saw a captain, dressed very nicely, really not dressed like us. He had on a uniform like us, but it was clean, boots were clean. It was obvious that this guy was from the rear. The captain made a gesture with his finger for me to get off the helicopter and come over and talk to him. I just assumed that he knew that I wasn't supposed to be there; I was supposed to be with the company commander, is what I assumed.

So I got off the helicopter. Bob took off, and I got on the next one. I went to the captain, and he said simply just one thing. He said, "It's not your time." That's all he said. I didn't think any more about it. The company commander came up a minute or so later, not very long, and we got on the next helicopter and took off.

That was the day that Bob's helicopter was shot down by a fifty-one caliber... it's a heavy machinegun, like our fifty caliber, but a big one. I can see the helicopter going in, and the pilot was trying to... He was going down, and he was trying to get it in, over this creek. I'm not sure why because the water wasn't very deep. But I could see the guys; they were jumping out of the helicopter, way too high. There was no way you were going to survive that, but they didn't want to go in with the helicopter.

So the helicopter went in, hit hard, exploded into flames, everybody killed. It was my job to go get them, put them in body bags. If you could recognize who was who... You're supposed to leave your dog tags either in your boots or around you. Some had them, some didn't. [I] didn't think much about that, other than being very sad that my friend was killed that day.

A few days later I realized, I said, "Gee, what a lucky break that was for that captain to pull me off that helicopter." So I went back, and I asked our company commander, who was around there, I said, "Who was that guy out

there that day, that captain?" He said, "There was nobody there." I said, "You know who the guy who was all cleaned up, dressed nice, obviously different than us." He said, "There wasn't anybody out there." Then I asked a couple other guys who were around there too—that I travel with—I asked them the same question. I said, "Who was that captain?" And nobody saw the guy, except me. **Nobody** saw that person, but me.

I told that story to some golfing buddies. One day we were playing golf, and they were so taken by that story, they called it the guardian angel story. I said, "I don't know about that, but it was a strange story." I have no idea who this guy was. I can't remember his face. I remember his uniform; it was clean and pressed, with captain's insignia and so forth, which you didn't even wear in the field; you didn't want any kind of insignia at all, not metal, but cloth. That was the story, true story.

DePue: Did you notice a nametag on the uniform?

Phillips: He had one, but I don't remember what the name was. I don't even remember his division patch or anything. I just remember seeing his clean uniform. He was a captain. He had on a correct hat, no helmet or anything like that, like a baseball cap that we would wear. And his shoes were not crappy, like ours, and dirty and dusty and cruddy. And I don't remember his face at all, not at all.

DePue: Your friends said this was a guardian angel, but it sounds like you're a bit skeptical of that.

Phillips: I don't know what to make of it. I know that happened. I was on that helicopter that was going to take off, with Bob. I was sitting there, and I got off because this captain motioned for me, just with his finger, for me to get off. I knew I shouldn't have been on there anyway, but I didn't think it would matter. One helicopter's as good as another one. Then, when he said that, that really didn't register with me either, "It's not your time." I just assumed he meant, "It's not your time to fly. You've got to go with your company commander." It was sort of a mild... I don't know, order, even though he didn't say it like that.

DePue: Something of a rebuke, maybe?

Phillips: Yeah, maybe. "It's not your time." And that's all he said. Those were the only words he said. Then I just sort of turned and was looking for the captain and, I never saw him again. Nobody ever saw him, period.

DePue: But it also sounds, in the way you describe the story, that you really never thought of this as an intervention from God, if you will, until you told your golfing buddies.

Phillips: No, I didn't. I didn't. They were asking me, "Tell us about one interesting thing that happened in Vietnam," because none of them had ever gone and stuff like that. "Well okay. I'll tell you an interesting story." I told them that story and boy, they were... I remember we were riding in a car, and they were all just...almost... if you can imagine, a little teary eyed, three guys.

They said, "You should write that down." One of them kept bugging me about it, and he said, "Write that down!" I think that's what... They took it as that [an intervention]. I don't know; it could be. There was no ghost-like person or anything.

This was a real guy. I just never saw him again, and nobody else saw him.



Though he doesn't recall the location of this picture, Phillips remembers the utter frustration, fatigue and fear that daily affected combat patrol. Perhaps you can see some of that in his face.

DePue: Would you describe yourself at that time as a religious person?

Phillips: When you're in combat, you're about as close to God as you ever get, because you talk to him on a rich and regular basis. I was probably more religious in Vietnam than I have been and was in my entire life because I talked to Him. I'd say, "Oh, man, if I can just get out of this scrape, I'll do this" or whatever. You're pretty religious. You think about that, a lot. That's about as religious—in talking to God on a regular basis—as I've ever experienced.

DePue: I asked because it sounds like you're a bit reluctant yourself to accept that maybe God stepped in to help you that day.

Phillips: Well... That would be nice if I thought I was anybody special or anything like that or whatever. Could that be? Well, maybe. I'm not sure I've heard of a story quite like it, but I'm sure there have been. Stories like that happen in places, but it's just an unusual occurrence. If that really happened like that, then I don't know. He must have...Somebody had something else in mind for me. I've heard that phrase before, "It's not your time yet," in some sort of religious vein, but I'm not quite sure where.

DePue: What was the sensation like? You're sitting in this helicopter. The pilot's in control of where you're going and how much you're going to be put into danger. Did you have this sinking feeling that, "He's going to take me someplace I don't want to go," or were you trusting of what he was doing?

Phillips: I trusted him. They were fairly young. As I told you, I was older than them. I was older than most of the soldiers in Vietnam. Even the junior officers were younger than me. I was like twenty-three or twenty-four; I forget. But I trusted him. He had a good head on his shoulders; most of them did. They were calm and cool and collected. They did dangerous things and didn't take extraordinary chances, but they took a lot of chances. A reasonable person, going down into hostile gunfire and hovering over trees, picking up people, just a beautiful target. Of course, it's loud. Those [blades] made that whop-whop-whop-whop sound, and you can hear them for miles.

The supply pilots didn't have to do that. They were out of there. And, of course, the gunships, they were just coming in, loaded for bear, looking for somebody. Then there was us. I'm not sure how those guys were selected, to tell you the truth. I don't know what the pecking order was for that, whether they wanted to be those pilots or not. I knew the pilots a little. We weren't buddies. I didn't hang around with them much, but I certainly respected them. I thought they were the bravest of the brave, those dust off pilots. The tankers were good and the guys in the infantry, they did a lot of brave things, but these guys do it hour after hour, day after day. In the infantry, we'd go for days at a time and not see a thing.

DePue: Did you have a different impression of Vietnam from the air than you had from the ground, when you were there?

Phillips: It was a beautiful country. The colors were striking. If it wasn't in the rainy season, which got to be a real mess... It was raining all the time. You can count on it to rain for an hour or two hours a day, muddy. When you're flying, you're flying in the rain, and you're not protected; there's no doors or anything. But you have a helmet on. I had a helmet that I could talk to the pilots in.

We'd kind of talk to each other, a few things and stuff like that. It was kind of nice. It was hard to do that in a tank, because I wasn't inside the tank that much. They had helmets too. In the infantry, they didn't want you to say a word anytime if you didn't have to, so it was different. It was kind of nice. I liked it, but I **knew** how dangerous it was. I just knew that they just loved to shoot down helicopters.

In fact, I later learned that they intentionally wounded soldiers, rather than try to kill them, [because] they knew that the infantry would stop and protect them and not chase them as much. Also, the helicopters would come, then they'd have a chance to shoot at some.

DePue: You've mentioned your first impression of Vietnam was the oppressive heat.

Phillips: Ooooh.

DePue: And it sounded like being in a tank or being on top of a tank, either one, would be a hot place.

Phillips: Oh, it was. It was loud and hot. You could actually cook. There were days when we would take our C-ration cans, open them up, and just set them on the tank. It would almost heat them up for you. It was that hot. I'm sure if you had an egg, you could fry an egg there. Of course, flying around, you get a breeze. The air's moving all the time.

The infantry down there, no breeze. It just depended on where you were. We were in the mountains more, which was cooler than down below, in the lowland areas, which tended to be hotter. But then you're walking up and down hills and stuff like that. You'll see some of my pictures of us just walking up and down hills. That's what we would do, just walk up and down hills, and we'd try to find them [the enemy]; we were looking.

I remember one mission is, we were looking for two guys called Salt and Pepper. [I'll] never forget. One was supposed to be a...The white guy was supposed to be a Russian advisor, and then Pepper was supposed to be a black American, who'd somehow gone over to their side, maybe he was captured; I don't know. Salt and Pepper was their nickname. They travelled with enemy soldiers and advised them or whatever, like we had an advisor, a Kit Carson scout. I remember we walked up and down. Another time, we were looking for a POW camp in the jungle. It was sort of a small one, where they would take you for a while because sooner or later we'd find it. Well, we never found it. But we walked up and down looking for that.

My greatest impression—I'm flipping back into the infantry—was that we didn't know where these people were. On occasion, we'd stumble into them, but they always seemed to know exactly where we were and what we were doing. They could plan things ahead of us and try to draw us into bad situations. It was very rare, the other occasion, where we kind of knew where they were and we were... If we would catch them...What we wanted to do was find them. Then if we could find them, then we could bring in reinforcements really quick.

Now, we tried not to get outside of artillery range from some fire base. They didn't want you to travel farther than artillery could support you. Of course, the tanks didn't come out there much. If you did [go out of range], then all you had was the helicopters or maybe gunships, the jets. I saw them some, but not a whole lot. I even saw B-52s on occasion, and you never see them. They would have what they call an arc light strike.

We walked into this area once. It was in the jungle, and holy cow, all the trees had been blown down, and everything was black. I thought, Man, what did they have here, a big fire or something? In the jungle you don't have fires. But they'd had an arc light strike, which is, I guess, some concentrated

strike, where B-52s would drop all these bombs. Of course, they're flying so high, you don't see them or hear them. The enemy was just scared to death of them because the bombs would just go "booo," and they were just there, whereas the jets, you could hear them. Helicopters, you could hear them. The arc light strikes, the B-52, they couldn't hear them. It was just "booo!"

DePue: You mentioned that Salt and Pepper was a memorable mission, but was there more to the story?

Phillips: We never found them. We were looking for them. I remember what the mission was. I said, "What are we doing? What are we looking for here?" He said, "We're looking for two guys, Salt and Pepper." I said, "Big deal, we're looking for two guys. Why...?" I think they were just special because they thought this was some sort of high-level Russian advisor that was helping them [the enemy]. Then they were really mad, of course, about an American who had supposedly... *Chieu hoi* was the word they used, which means you surrender and work for the other people.

DePue: *Chieu hoi*?

Phillips: *Chieu hoi*, C-h-i-e-u h-o-i. That was what the soldiers... if they were to surrender. Of course, they never surrendered; that never happened. There was no surrendering soldiers.

DePue: Why not?

Phillips: We just didn't catch them. They were either dead or near dead. They just didn't give up; they didn't. If they found themselves in a bad situation, they would shoot it out until they were done. That's just like the Japanese in World War II.

DePue: How about the flip side of the equation? What did you and your buddies think about being captured by the North Vietnamese?

Phillips: Ooooh. That just terrified us, being captured by enemy soldiers. We had a pretty good idea that it wouldn't be very good. Now we did find a prisoner camp that was empty, so we could see the little cages where they kept them. They'd dig holes and then put something over the top and let them in and out. But they'd have to stay in these holes that fill up with water and rats. That was very scary. I'm not sure I ever knew anybody that was captured. If I did, I don't know. More of the people that were captured were the flyers. They shot the flyers down and captured them.

DePue: I want to go back and talk more about the medevac missions that you were doing. I'm assuming that a medic on the ground, one of your comrades on the ground, would have patched these injured up as best they could, and then you got to pick them up. What kinds of injuries were you seeing on these helicopters?

Phillips: Oh, a lot of gunshot wounds, of course. Sometimes they would be shot multiple times, two or three times. Belly wounds, we really couldn't give them morphine. A belly wound was where... actually intestines sometimes.

DePue: Why couldn't you give them morphine then?

Phillips: I guess it lowered their heart rate down; the morphine lowered their heart rate down because it took away the pain. They were afraid that they would just pass away. But if you were hit in... Your dream wound, and I'd say that, seriously... A dream wound—they call it \$1 million wound—would be to be hit in the shoulder, like the gunfighters from the Old West. They'd get winged in the shoulder, and it'd pass all the way through. "Oh, well, I'm okay; no problem."

Well, (laughs) their [the enemy's] bullets were different than our bullets. Ours were high velocity, grinding bullets, and they had some of our weapons. If you were hit with an M-16, a .223 round, and you were hit almost anywhere, it would start grinding, and it would tumble through there. It isn't a clean, little hole, little and then big in the back. The problem with our bullets was that, as they passed through jungle, they would hit foliage, and then they would tend to be deflected, because a .223 round is really nothing more than an enhanced .22, high velocity.

Their bullets, those 7-6-2 [mm] rounds, were heavier duty, and they would not be deflected by the foliage. They would travel a little truer. They would hit you (slaps hands) hard like that, but they wouldn't grind. They would tend to just go right through. If you hit a bone somewhere... Sometimes it would hit a bone and just be deflected inside your body. We saw that.

The other kind of wound that we saw a lot was booby traps. There were several kind of elaborate and non-elaborate booby traps. You can be walking along and step into something with what they call a punji stick, which was bamboo, sharpened on both ends, dipped in excrement to make it more likely that you would get a fever and infection from that. [From booby traps, they ranged] all the way to mines and grenades. They would put grenades in little cans. The grenade would be in the can, and then they'd string the wire across wherever they thought we would walk. Then, as you tripped it, it would pull the grenade out of the can, where the little thing that protected it had already been taken off, the pin. [There were] lots of those, lots and lots.

If they would ambush us, they would know where the ambush was going to be and prepare it ahead of time. I can remember one time we were ambushed, and we were on a trail, which you're not supposed to be on a trail because they can prepare those places. You just take off through the woods. Anyway, we were on a trail, and they had what's called an L-shaped ambush. They would shoot this way and shoot this way and then of course, we had the natural tendency to jump off the trail over here. Well, they had pre-prepared

that with punji sticks. So a lot of the soldiers would just jump onto the punji sticks. Any kind of opening in the jungle that was big enough for a helicopter, they had punji sticks all over the place for that. So you had to actually go down and kind of pull these sticks up.

They had bigger mines. When I was with the tanks, they had actual bombs that had not gone off. They would take those and bury those in the roads. It was like the IEDs [Improvised Exploding Devices] that they had in Afghanistan, try to blow up the armored vehicles. I would say most of the wounds were gunshot wounds or booby traps, occasionally RPG stuff. RPG is a Rocket Propelled Grenade; those were a pretty devastating weapon. We had that stuff too, but see, they didn't have any air support or artillery. They didn't have either one, and we had both. So, if we could get them to stay somewhere for very long, we could really bring heat on them, all kinds.

DePue: What were the injuries that you least liked to deal with, as a medevac medic?

Phillips: Probably the ones that dealt with the head area, because if you're shot in the head...maybe a pass through or something like that, and the sucking chest wounds, you're shot in the stomach area.

Being wounded on your limbs, your arms and your legs, that was easy to kind of take care of, wrap up and try to stop the bleeding. It's not in that kit, but I had another kit with things called a hemostat in it. They look like scissors, but they're not scissors. They're like a clamp. If the arteries or veins are exposed and bleeding a lot, then you're supposed to clamp these off, stop the flow of blood. That's really the trick, was to try to stop as much the flow of blood because you'll bleed to death fairly quick if you don't try to stop it. That was the big trick, try to keep them alive.

DePue: How long would it be before you could get them back to the evac hospital?

Phillips: It depends on where we were on the mission. It could be like ten or fifteen minutes, or it could be forty, forty-five minutes. It depends on where we were, where **they** were, compared to the nearest place. I'd say half an hour was routine, to fly them in there.

DePue: Bill, your discussion of the nature of these injuries is rather clinical. (Phillips laughs) How do you deal with it emotionally, once you're in the midst of all of this?

Phillips: You look at each one, and you try to figure out what the problem is with each soldier, where they're hit. If they're hit, and obviously they're hit somewhere, you turn them over to see if there's a wound in the back because the one in the back's always going to be bigger than the one in the front, and that's usually the one that has the problem. If there's blood spurting out—which was fairly common—I'd be digging in there with a hemostat.

I didn't pull many bullets out, although I did on occasion, especially fragments. I had tweezer-type things, and I could go in there and pull out the ones that were fairly visible. But it wasn't like the Old West, where you go in there, and they knock you out and then pull the bullet out with a Bowie knife or anything like that. We didn't do that. They didn't want us to do that. But occasionally we would feel in there, especially if there was an entrance wound and no exit wound, then you know the bullet's still in there. Then they'd have to go in there and try to clinically find it and pull it out.

DePue: "They" being the surgeons?

Phillips: Yeah. I didn't do that.

DePue: Did you feel like you were up to the task?

Phillips: It was required of me, and I tried to be as knowledgeable as I could. You learned more things as time went on, the more of these things you see and handle, Well, I've done that one; now I know.

I carried a whole drugstore of drugs with me. I carried anything, up to and including morphine. I would have Benzedrine, Dexedrine, which are uppers, to keep you peppered up. We had Librium and Valium. I had Thorazine, which is what you get in a mental hospital, if you go crazy and go wild, and we had some of those.

You get so scared when you're being shelled with mortars or something, they'd just go off the deep end. You just give them a little injection of Thorazine, and it levels them right out. Or if they get so tired they just can't hardly function, you give them a Benzedrine, which is a little bitty white pill, and (hand slap) let me tell you, they'll just pop right up for about five or six hours. Then, of course, we had malaria pills. We had a big one they took once a week and then a little one they had to take once a day. That was part of my job when I was in the infantry was make sure they would take them. They wouldn't take them because it gave them diarrhea. So they'd take them [from me] and throw them out.

Actually, if you can believe this, they were anxious to get sick. They wanted to get sick because, if they got sick, then they got to go back, and going back was the trick, the treasure. It was my decision as to who went back and who didn't. So let me tell you, I was a popular fella. The doc said you should go back. Send me back, Doc; send me back. I'm...whatever.

DePue: So that was your name, Doc?

Phillips: Oh, yeah. Every single medic was called doc (laughs), with no exceptions. Even though I'm a doctor now, that Doc was a different kind.

DePue: That was a nickname you didn't fight, I take it.

Phillips: No, I understood that. Everybody else had nicknames, but if you were a medic, you were Doc; that's it. You had your own guys to watch.

DePue: Did you deal with the surgeons much, especially when you were in medevac?

Phillips: Some, not too much. The battalion surgeon that we had when I was with the armor, he was an unusual fella. Most of the surgeons were drafted. They were doctors that were drafted, and they were all different kinds. I can't say they were real military gung-ho guys, but they were doctors, and they did know their stuff.

I've seen doctors sort of like M*A*S*H, who just made fun of the Army.²⁶ They wouldn't wear boots and whatever; I don't know, wouldn't shine their brass. Who's going to say something to them? Blah, blah, blah, all the way to some who wore pearl handled pistols, and they wanted to ride around in their own armored personnel carrier; they had their own. So they were different. I respected them. Most of them were pretty young.

DePue: Were they competent at what they did?

Phillips: Yeah, they were; they were very competent. I trusted them, and they learned real quick. A doctor in Vietnam, he got enough real-life experiences to last a lifetime. It was over and over and over and over and over and over again, and no two wounds are exactly alike. We didn't have much burns or anything like that, but all kinds of wounds, just everything you can think of, this blown off, a leg blown off, get shot in the face. You think, "Well, a guy can't live being shot in the face." I saw a guy live who got shot five times, and he lived. He lived, holy smokes!

DePue: At least while he was under your care.

Phillips: Yeah, he was alive when we got him on, and I thought he would live. I was talking to him. He was shot five times, gee whiz. It isn't like the movies, where they just "Aaah," expire, blah, blah. Well, that isn't the way it is. They're hollering and screaming. And I'll tell you something. You know what they always hollered? They always said what they wanted was their mother. I don't care if they were married or whatever, when they were wounded, Buddy, they asked for their mother, which I always thought, Well, I guess that's true.

DePue: Are there some of these that have stayed with you, whether you wanted them to or not?

²⁶ M*A*S*H (an acronym for Mobile Army Surgical Hospital) is an American war comedy-drama television series that aired from 1972 to 1983. The show revolves around Members of the 4077th Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, who care for the injured during the Korean War and use humor to escape from the horror and depression of the situation. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M*A*S*H_\(TV_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M*A*S*H_(TV_series)))

Phillips: A couple. One guy was shot late in the afternoon. It was like 5:00 or 6:00, and it was getting dark pretty soon. I was afraid that they [the helicopters] wouldn't come in at night because they didn't do that; they didn't have to. Occasionally, if you just begged and begged them, they'd come in at night because travelling at night was dangerous, because you'd have to use lights and stuff like that. At night was Charlie's time. That's when they [the enemy] were up and moving around. We moved around in the daytime, and they moved around at night.

So, I called the them, and they wouldn't come in and get him. This was when I was with the infantry. They said, "You'll have to take care of him tonight. I thought, Oh God, he won't last the night. He was shot two or three times; I forget what it was. He was there, and I was sitting with him all night long. I'd talk to him. He'd tell me stories about home and this and that and his car and his girl. He was nineteen or whatever. Then, early in the morning, he started talking real quietly about his mother, and I thought, Oh, oh, because when they started talking about their mothers, somehow they knew maybe what was coming. And he died. Before they could come and get him the next morning, he was dead. I always felt bad about that, but I couldn't keep him alive all night long, but—

DePue: You've mentioned it several times here. You were a medevac medic on a medevac aircraft. Then you ended up in the infantry. How and why and when?

Phillips: It was near the end of my tour or maybe mid-tour; I don't know. I'd kind of resigned myself that this was what I was going to be doing, flying around on helicopters all day long, getting shot at and pulling people out. I thought, Well, okay. Then one day I came in, and they said, "Pack your bags. Go down and get infantry gear, like this."

DePue: You're looking at your aid bag.

Phillips: Yeah. And also a canteen and a ruck sack and all this. They said, "There's an infantry company that has been ambushed, and all of its medics are wounded; they don't have any. You're going out there, and you're going to be the head medic. We'll send you a couple more as soon as we can." Whew, so I had about two hours to go get my stuff and get some gear. They gave me a rifle, said, "Okay, this is your rifle." We went out. They couldn't land. It was on the side of a hill, so they just approached the side of the hill, and I jumped out. I kind of rolled down the hill... This is a true story too.

I'm rolling down the hill, and I get to the bottom of the hill. I thought, Well, that's a great start. They can't even land. So, I'm leaning back like this, to see what's behind me. I'm digging, and I find this old French machinegun. It was a sub-machinegun, nine-millimeter, whatever it was. But it was old; it'd been there a long time, probably since the Indo-China War. I thought, That's a

great start, too; I find a French machinegun as soon as I fall out of this helicopter.

Then they found me and took me back to where the captain was. He was a nice guy. That was him, Anderson, very nice guy. We talked. He said, "Boy, I'm glad to see you." I said, "Well," (both laugh) not that I had any gravy job, but it's the infantry. He said, "Oh, you'll be fine. You just travel with me, in the middle of the column all the time, no problem." I got some medics, and you just learn.

It was just the walking and being dirty all the time. You'll see some in the pictures. You're just filthy all the time. You can't wash. It's not like you run across these little bubbling babbling brooks, where you get nice water and stuff like that, because you run out of your water real quick. And water, believe it or not, is heavy. You carry about five quarts of water; that is heavy. But you needed the water all the time.

DePue: Do you remember when this occurred?

Phillips: No. You mean what month or so?

DePue: Yeah. When we talked earlier, you thought it was in late May or June.



There weren't many opportunities to stop and stick your feet in a babbling brook. In this shot, Phillips is brushing his teeth.

Phillips: I thought it was that. That would be my guess. You kind of like lose track of time. The only thing you're really thinking about is how many days you've got left before you go home. I knew that. Everyday you've got one less day, 342, 285, and stuff like that, until DEROS, date eligible to return from overseas station. I'll never forget that little doo-dad. (both laugh)

DePue: What was the unit you were assigned to?

Phillips: 1st Battalion, 11th Infantry, B Company. I'm pretty sure that's it.

DePue: This would be all right here. Here it is.

Phillips: Is that it?

DePue: (reading) Company B, 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry.

Phillips: 14th Infantry, okay.

DePue: And this is still part of the 4th Infantry Division?

Phillips: Yeah. Right. They were called the Golden Dragons, and our colonel was called The Dragon.

DePue: That would be the 14th Infantry, the Golden Dragons?

Phillips: Yeah, that battalion.

DePue: You've mentioned it a couple of times before, but I want you to flush out exactly what a Kit Carson scout is.

Phillips: Well, I have a picture of him. This particular one was an NVA sergeant who had been captured—I told you that was a pretty rare occasion for us—but he'd



This was a so-called Kit Carson scout, an enemy soldier that had been captured and decided to work for South Vietnam instead of languishing in a POW camp. He traveled with a battalion that never really trusted him.

been captured, and he was in a prisoner of war camp. I think once they're there, they try to coerce them, one way or another, to work for us. You see, the problem was, I told you, we never could find these people. Of course, these guys had been there and done that, so they would have a lot of information they could give us on places where they might be or how we could find them easier. He didn't speak any English, but we had a guy or two who could speak some Vietnamese and would converse with him, in case we found papers or something like that. They called them Kit Carson scouts. I guess the deal was that if you work for us, then after a period of time, when we can trust you, they'll parole you or something like that.

So, we had one with us. He wasn't with us all the time, but he was with us on occasion. Nobody really liked him, and nobody trusted him. We figured, one of these days he'll get ahead of us, and he'll just take off, and that will be the end of finding him. I really don't remember what happened to him.

DePue: Was he just not a very likeable personality?

Phillips: He was a former enemy soldier, and we just didn't trust him. You have to realize that it was very difficult for us to distinguish between enemy soldiers and just people. When you would go into villages mostly what was there was women and kids and old men, virtually no young men, period. If we were to find something like... We found a cache of rice; they like to stash this rice, which was their staple of food. They'd stash it and maybe weapons and maybe

ammunition, and then they could come back and get it later. We didn't trust them; we didn't get along with them. They didn't like us; they didn't help us, except for the Montagnards.

We got along well with them. They were sort of like primitive people. They didn't even have clothes. But they liked us because the Vietnamese didn't like them. The [the Vietnamese] looked down on them. They were great scouts for us. Boy, we were **really** happy when we ran into Montagnards. They would carry these little crossbows, about two or three feet long. You wouldn't think they could do much damage with that, but they could. They even had these blowgun deals, about four feet long, where they'd "whish," blow a dart there and stuff.

DePue: You are describing a lot of these missions. You're going into South Vietnamese villages; is that correct?

Phillips: Yeah, right.

DePue: But the way you're describing them, you looked at them as enemies as much as anything.

Phillips: We were **very** careful with them. We did not look at them as allies. We never went anyplace, even in the larger towns. When we were in larger towns like Ahn Khe or Pleiku, actually downtown, we didn't trust them there either. It was very clear to us that they didn't want us there. They would glare at us; they were not friendly; they didn't smile.

DePue: But we're there to help them.

Phillips: Right. That's the problem.

DePue: Did that experience cause you to rethink what was going on and why we were there in the first place?

Phillips: Yeah, it certainly did. I'm thinking, What in the world? Why are we here? These people hate us; they hate us, almost without exception. When we were with soldiers from South Vietnam, they would steal from us. It was very clear you couldn't trust them. You couldn't count on them. If something really happened, why they'd take off. They weren't above taking their uniforms off and just taking off. It was not a friendly environment. There was no...like I'm sure, in World War II when you liberate a village, they're coming out and they're hugging and kissing you and giving you wine. Well, that never happened. We never had anything like that.

DePue: Did you understand why, in general, the South Vietnamese population hated you?

Phillips: The politics of it, I think, was that the people were either being oppressed by the government, because the government would just come in and conscript their young men, or the VC would come in at night and conscript their young men, except they tended to... Politically, I think the VC and the NVA were a little more clever than we were. Their political lingo was that we're [the U.S. soldiers] trying to unite the Vietnams, and we are one of you. We got rid of the French, and we got rid of the Japanese, and we're going to get rid of these guys. We lasted past those, and we can last past these guys. It doesn't matter how many of them they kill, we're going to have more. And that seemed to be the case.

It's just that they were like them, and we weren't like them. And we're propping up a government that they didn't like anyway. They didn't like the government we were helping. I'm not sure I like the government that we were helping, but I didn't see them much.

DePue: The war that you were fighting, did it seem to be a war about opposing communism?

Phillips: That was the one thing I understood of the politics of it because I knew what had happened in the Korean War and so forth. When the North Koreans had attacked the South Koreans, we helped them. Then we stabilized them, and we ended up right back where we started. I knew about the French losing, and then they divided the country in half, north and south like Korea. And I knew that the government was weak in South Vietnam. If we were to leave, they would lose. And that's exactly what happened. As soon as we left and withdrew our support, they lost.

The other thing that's kind of unsaid is that it wasn't that the enemy was fighting all by themselves. The Koreans...not the Koreans, but the Russians and the Chinese were helping them materially just as much as we were helping the South Vietnamese. They were supplying them nonstop with weapons; AK-47 was a good weapon. They weren't fighting with old weapons there. And they were good soldiers. We kind of just wanted to do our job and go home, and they had a political agenda; [we're] going to liberate our country and get rid of the invaders. And that's what we were. We were in their country.

DePue: And they weren't going home.

Phillips: They weren't going home. Yeah. If you were a North Vietnamese soldier, and you got wounded in the south, you could kiss yourself goodbye because you weren't going to get rotated home, like us, if we got wounded. Very likely you weren't going to survive if you got shot. I only ran across one medical person who was an enemy soldier, just one time. He was a doctor; he was a surgeon. But he was wounded so bad that they just left him. He didn't live two or three hours, but he was a doctor.

DePue: Did you see many dead Vietnamese and Viet Cong?

Phillips: It depended. If we would have a firefight and find one or two or three, it was a good day. To find more than that was a pretty unusual day. Only on those days like that, where we were there, in action, all day long. Usually they tried to either hide or take their wounded with them, so we could never figure out. We had what's called blood trails. You knew you hit them, and then we never found the body, not lots. There were not very many large-scale battles in Vietnam, maybe half a dozen.

DePue: I want to go back to your experiences as a medic and talk, not necessarily about the injuries, but the illnesses you had to deal with.

Phillips: We had some really good ones there. The first thing you get, which just sort of goes with the territory, is something called jungle rot. That's just from being dirty. That's simply is what it is. You'd get these large lesions, especially in between your fingers, on your arms, sometimes on your face that's easily cured. If you send them back in the rear, and they just wash them, day after day after day, it goes away in four or five days. That was very common, to have these lesions.

As far as the sicknesses, malaria was probably the number one thing that we ran across, and that's from a bite of an Anopheles mosquito. You can't even see it, it's so small. If you took your medication, one a day and once a week, you're pretty well.

DePue: Was this quinine that they were taking?

Phillips: Well, no. It was... What was the name of it? I remember the names of the malarias, vivax and falciparum.

DePue: There were different kinds of malaria?

Phillips: Yeah, one was more serious than another one. Then we even had cerebral malaria. That was deadly. You could actually die from malaria. I'm not sure I saw that, but it was nothing to have a fever of 103, 104 and get the sweats. I had malaria, and occasionally, once every year or two years, I'll get again. You know when it's coming because you'll get the sweats, and you'll get the chills, and you'll get cold, and there's nothing you can do. They [the soldiers] wanted to get malaria. That's two weeks back in the rear, if you got malaria. That's the cure for it.

DePue: How about some of the other things that you encountered?

Phillips: Oh, we had jaundice; we had hepatitis; we had dengue fever. We had...Let's see... We would get a lot of things from drinking dirty water. I think that was hepatitis.

DePue: Cholera?

Phillips: No, we didn't have that.

DePue: Hepatitis certainly would have been present.

Phillips: Yeah, because we were drinking dirty water all the time. I drank some of the dirtiest water you could imagine.

DePue: Did you have purification tablets for the water?

Phillips: We did, but we ran out of those pretty quick. When you're drinking three to four quarts of water a day, if you can get it, dirty or not... You go through some of these little like rice paddies, that's dirty water because the water buffaloes are defecating in it. It was dirty. But water's water if you don't have it, and always the leeches. That was an interesting one. If you start walking through those things [rice paddies], you get leeches. Then we'd have to stop, and they'd take off their clothes. You have to try and either put salt on them or pull them off with tweezers.

And then the ants, ants, you haven't lived until you've sat down on a red ant colony, which I've seen a guy do. He just sat down on it; he didn't know. They just about ate him up. He was going into convulsions, he'd been bitten so many times.

We had bees. I remember one time I was walking in the column, and everybody started running back. They said, "Doc! Doc! Doc! Doc! Bees! Bees!" I said, "What are you talking about?" Somehow the lead people had knocked down a beehive, and all the bees were just flying back through there. It's like they were being shot. They were just running and yelling and trying to find someplace to hide from those bees. I had guys I bet had been stung twenty times. You try to give them an anti-toxin.

Snakes, they got some really good snakes there (laughs). And I don't mean the big ones. It was the little ones you had to watch out for. They had some real dandies. The snakes would stay away from you if you would stay away from them. Oh, I hated the snakes the worst.

And spiders, I remember once a guy brought back a spider. It looked like a tarantula. He put his helmet over it, and his legs were sticking out, so it was bigger than your helmet. This was a spider; I'm not kidding you. He put his helmet over it. He was holding it, and he put that over there. I said, "Man, I don't want that thing." So, he was looking at it, holding it, and then killed it and whatever.

But the really deadly ones—the spiders and the ants and the snakes—were the little ones; those were (whistles)... And then, if we got bit by a snake, they'd want to know what kind of snake it was, because there's

different anti-toxins. I'd say, "How do I know what kind of snake it was?" If he's bit by a cobra you give him this. If he was bit by a coral snake, you give him that. So they had to go look for the snake, to try to find it.

DePue: Weren't you the guy asking what kind of snake it was?

Phillips: I was. I'd say, "What kind of snake was it?" (both laugh) And then rock apes.²⁷ I bet you haven't heard of that one, rock ape. That's right. We were on this hilltop one time, and I'm in this foxhole with a couple of guys and hear this strange sound. I haven't heard that sound before. I said, "What is that?" They said, "That's a rock ape." I said, "Come on, don't give me this rock ape business." They said, "I'm serious doc; it's a rock ape." "What do you mean, a rock ape?" I said, "Are you talking about a gorilla?" They said, "Well, we don't see them too often, but I think they're something like that. They live in the hills and in the rocks, and we call them rock apes." I never saw one, but I heard of rock apes. I'm not sure they were real dangerous, because they were vegetarians. But they had an evil smell, and they were big and strong. It was just one of those things, another thing to scare you.

DePue: Well, doc (Phillips laughs), there's one other thing that I would assume the soldiers would occasionally approach you about. Soldiers being soldiers, they get to go on R & R, and they come back.

Phillips: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I did that many a time. When we'd go back for whatever it was, then you'd pull duty in the aid station, the battalion aid station. If the guys wanted to see women, oddly enough the place to go was the garbage dump because we would bury the garbage, and then they would come and dig it up, for food, the Vietnamese. The women would hang out at the garbage dump, and that was not a well-guarded spot. It was one of those few places where we actually got together because it wasn't very often that they would just let us go waltzing through any of these little villages just for fun. That didn't happen too often.

Then they had road girls, girls on little scooters or bicycles or whatever. If that was the case, they would come in in the morning and tell me this and that symptom. I'd say, "Okay, I know just the thing." The doc would look at them, and he said, "Go fix it," and I'd go fix penicillin. It was a powder that we had. I'd mix it with something, and then I'd give them two shots, one in each cheek, two times. That cured it, usually.

DePue: That would take care of both gonorrhea and syphilis, or were there other things you dealt with?

²⁷ Often, soldiers returning from war come home with stories of seeing a monster. Throughout history, plenty of wartime monster sightings have been reported. However, one sighting in particular, or more accurately, multiple sightings, seems to have been more documented than most. This is the case of the Rock Apes of Vietnam. (<https://exemplore.com/cryptids/Wartime-Mystery-The-Rock-Apes-of-Vietnam>)

Phillips: Well, syphilis was a little bit different. Syphilis would actually go away. You'd have the symptoms, and then they would go away. I'd ask them that specifically. If the symptoms didn't go away, you pretty well knew they had gonorrhea. If they had these symptoms, and then it went away, I'd say, "Oh, oh." Then we'd check the blood and stuff like that. Syphilis can be cured in the early stages, until it goes on and on and on and so forth. [There was] not so much syphilis. If it was, we cured it because, as soon as they would tell me if it went away all by itself, then I knew.

DePue: Think back to that training you got in Texas. How well-versed and prepared were you?

Phillips: They never mentioned that (laughs).

DePue: Did they mention all of these things, the whole litany of different things?

Phillips: No, they never mentioned all the drugs we had and the stuff, but I can still name the people... These are street drugs now, like Benzedrine and Dexedrine. That's what truck drivers take to stay awake. They buy it at a truck stop. That new energy drink they have, I suppose that's kind of a mild version of this stuff. You just learn. But I carried it all, and it was up to me to dispense it. I could get a whole bottle of Dexedrine or Benzedrine or Thorazine.

DePue: Were guys coming up to you just because they knew you had that stuff?

Phillips: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. "Oh, doc, hey. I'm real tired, whew. I need something to pick me up." Once or twice maybe, but then, when they would come back all the time, [I'd say,] "No, I'm not doing that." Or [I'd hear,] "I got the shakes and want a valium" or whatever.

DePue: But the attitude the troops took towards you and the other medics, did that mean that they tended to take care of the medics?

Phillips: They did; they **really** did. They gave us the widest latitude. We never had to walk point, which is walk first. I did it once, just for the heck of it, and the captain said, "Don't you ever do that again." And we never had to go into the caves or the underground places they would find. They would find the littlest guy we had and give him a flashlight and a forty-five—[he was] called a tunnel rat—and have then go down there because those holes were mighty small; those were little people. Never had to do that, some of those really dangerous things that you do.

The guy walking point obviously was the most dangerous spot. Occasionally you'd find somebody that liked to do that, but usually it's the goof-offs. They would punish you with making you walk point, because you didn't want to walk point. I didn't want to go down in those tunnels. I didn't pull that duty. They **did** take care of us. If we got hurt, and they got hurt, they were in much bigger trouble.

DePue: I know that you were assigned to this infantry company before the Cambodian invasion. We pretty much know that happened in May, so you must have been there by that time. Tell me about going into Cambodia.

Phillips: The Cambodian invasion was sort of unusual and came up real quick. I remember they brought all the companies in from the field to some airbase. We were riding in trucks, which wasn't very common. Nearly the whole battalion was in this big convoy of trucks, and we were going west. We knew we were going west, towards Cambodia. We traveled about a whole day, and we get to this big airstrip. There's choppers just lined up there, hundreds of them, just line after line of choppers. We knew this was going to be a big deal.

And they were issuing LAWS rockets. A LAWS rocket is a light anti-tank weapon. We thought, Oh, my gosh, now we're going to run into enemy tanks and stuff like that. We had LAWS rockets, but we would just use them against bunkers. But they were issuing [a] big-time supply of



Phillips waits for their helicopter assault into Cambodia in May of 1970. By this time he was a senior medic in an infantry company. Note: The towel around his neck is to wipe off the sweat and the rings on his hat are for hanging smoke grenades.

LAWS rockets. Then they told us, in the evening, that we were going to get up early in the morning, and we were going to go into Cambodia. We were invading Cambodia.

We were kind of happy about that because those little guys used to retreat back into Cambodia, where it was nice and safe, and we couldn't go get them. So they'd get across the border, and it would be like going into Mexico; they'd be safe. So we were pretty doggone happy to go in there and get rid of their little haven for them.

We spent the night, and they were telling us "Now you're going to run into bunkers. You're going to run into large numbers of enemy soldiers, bigger than you've probably seen, maybe armor, tanks and your fortified positions. I'd been there a long time, been there, been able to do whatever

they want. This was one of the few times I went into combat in a Chinook helicopter, one of those big ones with two blades.²⁸

DePue: It was a big blade up front and back.

Phillips: Yeah, it was a big transport helicopter. There was like thirty or forty of us inside. We went in, and they told us as we were going in that they'd identified this big open spot—it was the high officer's garden—because it was open. We were going to go land in his garden. What we wanted to know was what was the resistance? How many were there, heavy machineguns, bunkers, that kind of stuff?

When we got there, most of them, they were gone. Not all of them, but most of them were gone. So we got to go through their headquarters, stuff like that. I got some really nice souvenirs from there. We pretty well surprised them because they had meals that they were cooking and just left them, took off.

The first day wasn't like hitting the beaches or anything like that. It wasn't too bad. Then, after we caught up with them a couple of times, we had some pretty heavy firefights.

DePue: But you were on foot patrols when you caught up with them?

Phillips: Yeah, yeah. Once we went through the base and secured it, we left some people there to sort of catalog what was all there and what was captured. They had trucks and all kinds of cases of ammo and weapons, all kinds of stuff we don't normally see, large amounts of it. So we left some people there. I'm not sure what they did with it, whether they blew it up or took it back with them or



Some of the captured weapons in the early days of the Cambodian invasion, when large amounts of military materials were captured. As long as they were not "automatic weapons," they could be taken home as souvenirs.

²⁸ The Boeing CH-47 Chinook is an American twin-engined, tandem rotor, heavy-lift helicopter, developed by American rotorcraft company Vertol and manufactured by Boeing Vertol. It possesses several means of loading various cargoes and is among the heaviest lifting and fastest Western helicopters. Its name is from the Native American Chinook people. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boeing_CH-47_Chinook)

whatever.

We took off chasing, I suppose, their office staff or whatever, the high-ranking people that were obviously there. Then we were looking for this mythical place called COSVN, C-O-S-V-N, which was supposed to be their bunker headquarters for that whole theater.

DePue: I looked it up, COSVN stands for Central Office for South Vietnam.

Phillips: Yeah. We would be chasing... This was one of the few times when we were hot on their heels. We were chasing them, and they were kind of pulling back, in front of us. Every once in a while, they'd stop and leave a good group there to shoot it out with us, so the rest of them, I think, could get farther away.



Phillips' favorite picture of his Vietnam experience, taken while his patrol was lost somewhere in Cambodia, and he was pondering their fate.

We were only there about two weeks, maybe a little longer, not much longer. We chased the snot out of them. It was different than being in South Vietnam; we were chasing them. We had a pretty good idea where they were, and they were running ahead of us. They must have known, and they did. We eventually just stopped.

DePue: Would you consider that was a successful mission?

Phillips: It was, in that we captured these supplies, and we interrupted their network of their safe havens and stuff like that. I'm sure they captured all kinds of documents and stuff like that, from something you don't normally get. I just wish that we would have been allowed to finish our mission because I can remember, the last day we were there, the captain said, "We're really close to COSVN; we're close. We should be able to be there by the end of the day." So we were all, "Hey, yeah." But then again, we were thinking, Well, they're not going to give that place up, so there's going to be a big shootout about that place.

We were all gearing up, and then they stopped. About noon they said, "Don't go any farther." "What do you mean, don't go any farther? That's why we came here." "No, don't go any farther." We waited a day or so, and then they said, "Pull back; go back." Then we went back. How far did we get? Fifteen miles, maybe. It's hard to say.

DePue: In the overall time that you were there, about fifteen miles?

Phillips: Fifteen miles, not very far. Of course, in the jungle, you don't travel real fast. We didn't.

DePue: It sounds like that's different terrain than you were in the central highlands.

Phillips: Yeah, it was. There was a few villages. We went rolling through the villages, no urban areas or anything like that.

DePue: Did the Cambodian people strike you as any different from the Vietnamese?

Phillips: No. No, they looked the same. They glared at us the same. I'm not sure how they felt because I think they were being taken advantage of by the North Vietnamese too. Politically, I'm not sure where they stood, but they were more like them than us. I don't think they really cared for us either.

DePue: Did you think at the time that it was the right decision to make, to go into Cambodia?

Phillips: Yeah, I would have done it. I would have done it before that.

DePue: How soon after all of this did you and others start to hear what the reaction was back in the United States?

Phillips: Well, we heard about Kent State. We heard about the student protests in the back, and we kind of knew that was going on anyway. But the Cambodian invasion, I guess, kicked off huge student protests, here in the United States, big time. I'm guessing, politically, that's why [President] Nixon stopped because the political protests got so heavy that he said, "We'll just stop. I did what I wanted to do, so now I'm going to pull out."

We heard about it, and we actually thought, We have guys killed every day, and I sure feel bad for four students to get killed in Kent State, but what about all my buddies going home in a box? I don't see anybody crying for them. We all knew that people in the United States—not everybody but certainly a large number of people—were very anti-war, and what we were doing was not popular, not supported. We all heard stories about not wearing your uniform when you go back and stuff like that. Some guys had gone for different things, like funerals, back and forth, and they told about the general attitude. I think we thought what we were doing is what...

The country asked us to do this. While we might think, I wouldn't have done it that way, and I wouldn't have... I could have told them, if they were to ask me, what their problem was, but of course, nobody did. I don't think they were aggressively fighting and using their air the way they could.

DePue: You were in Vietnam at a time when, obviously, the opinion back in the United States was changing, and you hear stories about how that was really

affecting the discipline and the morale back among the troops themselves. Were you seeing evidence of that?

Phillips: That didn't help, but that wasn't the problem. I think the problem, if you put it in a sentence or two, is that we didn't see any end to this thing. We didn't see like all of our sacrifices and all we're doing is making a heck of a difference. We'd fight over a hill a whole day, and guys would get killed. Then we'd leave the damn hill two days later. What are we fighting for? Are we fighting for territory, like they did in World War II? Once you conquered territory, that was your territory then. Well, we'd go into places and do something and have firefights, and then we'd leave it. Back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, and I'm thinking, What in the world? What are we winning here?

Of course, in those days the military, the military... They gave you this bogus stuff about body count. That was how you figured out how you won or lost; what was the body count? If you couldn't produce a lot of enemy bodies, well, blah, blah, blah. I thought, What kind of baloney is that? I said, "How are we going to win this thing, you know? How are we going to win this war?" I think that's what really bothered them. It didn't help, all this protest.

DePue: But from what you described before, that would be a reason that it was perhaps the right decision to go into Cambodia, from your perspective.

Phillips: Oh, yeah. I'd have done it before. I'm sure there were probably greater political considerations involved, but I'd have gone into North Vietnam. I'd have invaded that place. That's how you win a war. If you're fighting a country, and they're safe in their country, and you can't ever go into their country, and you're fighting against them? What kind of war is that? If we're fighting North Vietnam, go to North Vietnam. Take it to them. We could have. I don't know why we didn't.

We just chased these little guys around the jungle all the time, and once in a while, they'll stand and shoot it out with you. But mostly... The normal action in Vietnam, at least my experience was, is that they would ambush the lead column, platoon, whatever. You usually went in linear formation, not very much horizontally or wide. Then they would shoot the first two or three guys that they saw and then take off running. They'd just turn around and take off running.

By the time we stopped, took care of the guys that were wounded or dead—because we didn't leave the bodies there, because if they were dead—then we'd have to come and get them too. Then we'd try to flank them and go around the edge. By all that [time], they were long gone. So two or three or five or ten guys would stop this whole column of 100 guys for hours on end, while we did our business, and they're long gone. Then two days later they'd

do the same thing, shoot the first two or three guys, take off. We would have loved to have found their columns.

Of course, they didn't move during the daytime much. That was true. They moved at night. We didn't move at night. We had starlight scopes, and we could see at night and all that, but not a whole lot. At night we stopped and sort of hunkered down, and they'd take off and move from place to place. That's what they did. We could see them if there was a big group of them and the helicopters and this and that.

DePue: What you've described so far though is that, even though people were asking a lot of questions, maybe just of themselves, you didn't see a drop-off in the discipline or the effectiveness of the unit?

Phillips: I did see guys... There were guys that smoked marijuana, but never, never in the field. I told them, I said, "I don't care what you do when you're back in the rear." I said, "You can go drink all you want. You can drink until you fall down. I don't care. You can smoke pot or whatever." I saw marijuana cigarettes, professionally made, soaked in opium paper. You could buy them like that. I saw that stuff, but I told them, I said, "Don't do it out in the field, when everybody's life depends on it."

I don't know what they did. There were kind of two groups. There was a group of guys who did a lot of that marijuana stuff. Now heroin, I never saw that. Cocaine, I never saw that. But marijuana was pretty prevalent. Then there were the guys who would just drink a lot, if they had that occasion, back in the rear. Liquor was pretty easy to get, pretty cheap.

DePue: But most of them did one or the other?

Phillips: One or the other. There was a smaller group yet that didn't do either.

DePue: How about yourself?

Phillips: I was more in the liquor group. But we had guys out there... If I thought they were taking marijuana or doing something like that, I would send them right back with a little note, and then they could get in some big trouble.

DePue: Was the leadership, the captain trying to do anything about all of this?

Phillips: Oh, yeah. I had two different captains. Both of them were pretty good about that. But the morale was slipping. I think it was slipping, as I said, because we couldn't see us winning. We couldn't see the strategy and what we were doing as winning. All we're doing is just marking time, running up and down, trying to find these little buggers. Then when we found them, we'd shoot it out with them, and we'd always win. They'd take off and leave. Then whatever we won, we'd leave very shortly afterwards. What kind of war is this?

DePue: Did you folks know about the Vietnamization process?²⁹

Phillips: Oh yeah. Oh yeah. See, that was starting when I was getting there. Like the 25th Infantry, down in the delta, they took them back. The 9th Infantry, I think they took them back while I was there. Some Marine units, I think the 82nd Airborne [Division] was already back by then. While I was there, one of the big bases, I think in Pleiku, just as I was leaving, they were handing it over to the Vietnamese, with the swimming pools and the air conditioners and all the equipment we had. Oh my gosh, just field after field of trucks and stuff like that. The problem was is that they couldn't fix anything. When they [the vehicles] stopped running, they were done.

DePue: You mean the South Vietnamese?

Phillips: No, they couldn't fix anything. They didn't understand mechanics. See, a lot of American kids knew mechanics, cars, tractors, whatever. They could fix things. These guys, they didn't know about mechanical things, so they didn't do real well. There were pilots and tankers and stuff like that, but... They never seemed to get it.

DePue: How about race relations?

Phillips: That was bad. It really was. You mean between the blacks? The blacks, the brothers we called them, always tended to gravitate to each other, whenever they had a chance. The brothers would always collect and be together, except in the field, not so much in the field. They didn't try to collect with each other and do things together in the field. They did what they were supposed to do to survive. But you get them out of that environment, and they slipped right back in it. We called it knocking knuckles. They had special handshakes, all that stuff. They would do that. I can remember, back when you could get a beer in some club or something like that, they always sat together. They had their own music. They just isolated themselves, socially, in whatever they could, except in combat, except out in the field. They didn't do it then is what I saw.

There were a lot of white guys from wherever, the South, who... They were very pointed in their views, and there were guys like me, in the middle. I'm just here to do my job. I don't want to make anybody mad here.

DePue: Do you remember any incidents that came up because of that?

Phillips: Yeah, I can remember a couple of times that there were fights. We were lining up to go to a movie one night. They had some outdoor movie or something. They were lining up to go in to see the movie, to sit down or whatever. The

²⁹ Vietnamization was a policy of the Richard Nixon administration to end U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War through a program to "expand, equip, and train South Vietnamese forces and assign to them an ever-increasing combat role, at the same time steadily reducing the number of U.S. combat troops." (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vietnamization>)

blacks, there must have been a group of them, five, ten, maybe more, came in there and cut in line, in front of this big long line that had been waiting. Boy, that started the doggonest fistfight you've ever seen. As soon as I saw that, I just turned around and walked off because I wasn't going to get involved. They had a granddaddy fistfight over that. Things like that would happen.

Then I told you the one, before we went to Cambodia. They refused to go. I couldn't believe that one. The night before we went to Cambodia, we're on the airstrip, I told you. They're trying to tell us what we're going to see and what may happen and kind of what we're doing and whatever. But in our whole company, I don't know how many there were—maybe it was a bigger group than that—the brothers all got together, and they refused to go.

I remember, a captain went down to talk to them and started yelling at them, "This is cowardice in the face... We could all shoot you," and all that. They said, "Well shoot us then." I remember them saying it, "Well, go ahead and shoot us. We're not going." Then the colonel came down, the dragon himself. He came down. He was yelling at them and all. This went on for an hour, and we were all watching and waiting to see what was going to happen. I didn't know; maybe they would shoot them (laughs). I don't know. I didn't really think they'd do that, but I thought maybe they'd arrest them or something. Then, in the morning when we got up, they were all gone. They didn't go.

DePue: They left themselves, or somebody came and got them?

Phillips: No, they were just gone. I never saw what happened to them.

DePue: Never heard what happened to them?

Phillips: Never did. I asked; I said, "What happened to those?" Nobody quite knew. I think what they did was they just took them back in the rear and spread them out over Vietnam again and tried to just move them out, just sprinkle them out among other units. I don't know what they did. I never heard that there was any courts-martial, or I never heard anything like that. I don't know.

DePue: Were there any black officers or NCOs?

Phillips: Yeah, yeah. Good ones too. What was this young lieutenant's name? I forget. Boy, he was really a good guy, very well liked. He was a college graduate, like me, and we would talk. He was from Virginia or somewhere, smart guy. Then we had some good sergeants, some really good ones.

DePue: So when the mutiny happened—for lack of a better word, the mutiny—were they involved with it?

Phillips: No, no. This was all lower ranking soldiers, black ones. In fact, they sent over a sergeant major, who was black, to talk to them. That didn't do any good.

Then there was a black officer. He went over there too, trying to talk to them, just them. That didn't do any good. I just couldn't believe that there would be an incident like that with our soldiers. It's okay to get in a fistfight, but to just refuse to go to combat. I **never** heard what happened to those guys, but I know they didn't go (laughs). I know that, because a couple of them were in my group.

DePue: When you say your group?

Phillips: Yeah, the group that I was going to be in, that I knew personally. Yeah, I knew a couple of them personally.

DePue: Were you hearing any stories about fragging of officers?

Phillips: Heard stories like that. Never saw it.

DePue: Better describe what fragging means.

Phillips: Fragging is when you take a grenade... Let's say you have a new lieutenant, or maybe even a new sergeant, who goes out. They're gung ho, and they'll lead you into dangerous situations and do dangerous things, maybe unnecessary chances, that kind of stuff. When you get there, you just need to listen to people and say, "Now this is the way it works. This is how this is handled," and so on and so forth.

Well, there's some guys, I guess, who didn't listen, and guys got killed that maybe didn't need to be killed, or whatever. But the word was that they would get fragged in their hootch or wherever it is that they were staying.³⁰ They'd roll a grenade in underneath them or underneath the privy, where you went to the bathroom. They would do that too. I never saw that personally, but I heard about it. There's the stories.

DePue: Tell me whether you were able to keep in touch with folks at home, especially your wife.

Phillips: Never did. The only guy I ever kept in touch with and I saw after the war was one of my medics, who was a policeman in Philadelphia.

DePue: No, I'm talking about with your wife and family, while you were in Vietnam.

Phillips: Oh. Not very much. We would get letters, but we couldn't keep them. We had to get rid of our letters.

DePue: Why?

³⁰ Hootch was a slang term for a place to live, either a soldier's living quarters or a Vietnamese hut. (<https://www.thoughtco.com/vietnam-war-glossary-1779962>)

Phillips: They didn't want you to carry around letters from certain places, where they might be talking about this or that. You weren't supposed to tell them where you are, what you're doing, that sort of thing. But the letters we'd get from them, we had to destroy. You could read them, but then we had to get rid of them because we aren't supposed to carry them. Now my letters, my wife kept, and I still have them. The ones that I sent back, and I still have those.



Clowning around with some friends in base camp between "humps" was natural. Here, Phillips attempts to look like a combat soldier, with the bandoliers of ammo and a machine gun that he had borrowed.

DePue: How much were you telling her?

Phillips: Not a whole lot. You just say, "Well, we're on this mission." We called it a hump. A hump could be two or three days or a week. It's when you just go out, and you're not connected with anything. You're just out there walking through the jungle. Most of the places, they didn't have a name anyway. These little villages had some sort of name? I can't remember. We were never in any town of any size. We were walking through...it was like the moon, in a jungle.

DePue: Did you look forward to seeing your wife's letters, your family's letters?

Phillips: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I did. I enjoyed the connection with home and stuff like that. My mom would write me and so forth, but we couldn't keep them. There was an issue there with my wife and me. Being gone and separated for a long time turned into an issue. That was very stressful for me, knowing that was happening when I was there. That happened to a lot of guys.

DePue: She was suggesting things in letters, or you were hearing from others?

Phillips: No, she did. She told me directly.

DePue: Are you willing to share what she was telling you?

Phillips: Things just weren't going good. As I told you, she was very anti-war to begin with, and then it got personal, that she had other interests and things like that. She was very frank and told me straight-up. But that's very stressful, when all you can do is write a letter.

DePue: I'm assuming the marriage didn't hold together after that?

Phillips: Well, it did actually, but it was pretty rocky there, because I had no way to talk to her personally, and the letters were a week old or stuff like that.

DePue: Do you feel like she was blaming you for some of this?

Phillips: I don't know. She was extremely anti-war, but I knew that from the get-go. She told me, "Don't even go to the Army." Then when I got orders for Vietnam, she said, "Well, go to Canada." I wouldn't go there. I think she was disappointed. I said, "Well, I just can't do that, and I'm not going to do that." Things kind of went downhill from there. Not being able to connect, it was not real common, but it was fairly common. You get over there and people [say], "What are you doing over there?" And, "That's a crappy war." And, "We're not winning anyway." And, "Those people don't want us." All [of] that's right.

DePue: Well, "Dear John" letters were hardly anything new to this war.

Phillips: No, or any war. But it is very, very stressful on you. When you're trying to concentrate on what you're doing, you assume everything's Jim-dandy back at home. Then when it isn't, you're thinking about that, and there's **nothing** you can do, zero.

DePue: Were you folks hearing about some of the more blatant protests, or were you hearing things like Jane Fonda's trip to North Vietnam?³¹

Phillips: We knew about that. Of course, I found out a whole lot more since then, but we all knew. "Hanoi Jane," yeah, we knew that she'd been there. Now, I didn't know the details until later, about her turning in some guys who gave her notes and stuff like that. But to this day, I wouldn't go to a Braves baseball game.³² I didn't even want to see the Braves, just because she was connected. You know, her and her family. I liked her father, Henry Fonda. I thought he was a great actor. Her brother I didn't care for much, who was also an actor, and then, of course, her. Whew, we knew about it. We just couldn't imagine anybody doing that. I couldn't imagine...If she does that, why do you ever let her back in the country? That had to be an illegal trip, to go there.

³¹ In July 1972, actress Jane Fonda accepted an invitation to visit North Vietnam. During her two-week stay, Fonda concluded that America was unjustly bombing areas in Vietnam and made several radio announcements over the Voice of Vietnam radio, imploring U.S. pilots to stop the bombings. Fonda met with seven American POWs and was photographed with North Vietnamese troops on an anti-aircraft gun, used to shoot down American planes, earning her the nickname "Hanoi Jane."

(https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/retropolis/wp/2017/09/18/how-jane-fondas-1972-trip-to-north-vietnam-earned-her-the-nickname-hanoi-jane/?utm_term=.a878c5ee9a84)

³² In 1971, Jane Fonda married Atlanta Braves major league baseball team's owner, Ted Turner.

(<https://www.ajc.com/entertainment/celebrity-news/happy-77th-birthday-ted-turner/9XNv4YFzSW8SIRuZmxRUJO/>)

DePue: Did you consider her then or do you consider her now a traitor?

Phillips: I do, absolutely. I absolutely consider her a traitor for going there. Then when I found out what she really did was even worse. I just...I could not stand her and still can't.

DePue: How about the officers and the NCOs that you worked with? What was your impression of them?

Phillips: Pretty good guys. Most of the junior officers were about my age or younger. They weren't very old. There were a lot of sergeants, they were not what we call lifers. They were just in and out, kind of like me. They seemed to have a little bit different philosophy than the people who were professional military. There didn't seem to be a whole lot of them. The professional military ones seemed to be the senior officers and the senior NCOs, like E7 and above and captain and above.³³ Those were the guys who liked it and were there.

They rotated the younger officers. If you were a junior officer, assigned to a combat unit, you only were there six months usually, and then they rotated you back. They just wanted more guys to get combat experience. I thought that was a bunch of crap. They get six months, and I get a year? What kind of... But that's what happened.

DePue: What did you think about the rotation policy?³⁴

Phillips: Well, good and bad. It was nice that there was a finite date when you knew that, if you survived this date, you could go home. You didn't know that in World War II; you didn't know that in Korea.

DePue: Korea, by the end of the war, they were on a one-year rotation as well.

Phillips: Were they? Okay, I didn't know that. But it was good to know that. Militarily and professionally I don't think it was a good thing because, by the time you really learned your job, and you became more used to it and adept at it, you were gone. Then you bring in a fresh new crop of people.

The other thing is, is that you never knew anybody when you went someplace. A lot of other times, like I think Afghanistan and Iraq, these units, these people knew each other before they went over there. Then they served in combat together. I think that's a big plus. You never knew these people.

³³ Sergeant first class (SFC) is the seventh enlisted rank (E-7) in the U.S. Army, ranking above staff sergeant (E-6) and below master sergeant and first sergeant (E-8) and is the first non-commissioned officer rank designated as a senior non-commissioned officer (SNCO). (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sergeant_first_class)

³⁴ The U.S. Armed Forces' rotation policy during the Vietnam War was to rotate individual troops in and out in twelve-month tours, with already deployed units in Vietnam. In other modern American wars, before and since, military units have been maintained and have deployed as a whole. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/FNG_syndrome)

DePue: Was there a sense that you didn't want to get to know the new guys?

Phillips: We didn't want to. We called them FNGs. I won't tell you what the F stands for, but the NG is new guy. You had your friends that... When you were an FNG, you made friends with people, and you were careful with them. But the new guys, you help them, and you're nice to them, but you don't really want to get to know them.

I think the reason was, without saying it, is it really was stressful when one of them would get killed. If it's one of your buddies, like Bob in my case, that was very stressful for me; that was very stressful for me. If Bob got killed, versus somebody I didn't know, big difference. You just didn't want to make friends, especially with new guys. They just had to fend for themselves. You'd tell them, "Don't do this. Don't do that. Do this. Do that."

DePue: You've talked quite a bit about Viet Cong and the VC. Did you respect the enemy?

Phillips: Yes. They were tenacious fighters. They would hold a position, if they had to, until they were dead or they thought they could escape. They were very slippery. They knew how to stay away from us; they knew how to camouflage; they were really good at that.

They would dig these holes and these bunkers, and we couldn't find them. We'd walk right past them all the time. We didn't know they were there. They were tenacious, mean fighters. They were quick, moved very fast. They didn't have a lot of stuff carrying like we did. They could get up and flat take off. And they knew where they were going, in a lot of cases. We had no clue what was around the next corner or whatever. They did.

DePue: All these comments you just had, do those apply to the Vietnamese and North Vietnamese or to the Viet Cong as well?

Phillips: Well, the Viet Cong is the local citizen soldier type thing. The NVA were regular soldiers. These guys had uniforms. It wasn't much of a uniform, but it was a uniform. They had their own equipment. They were professionally trained; they knew about weapons; they knew about our weapons.

The VC were really big into booby traps and local things. They tended to stay within a certain radius of where they lived. They didn't move around the country. The NVA were from all over.

DePue: Which ones were you more fearful and respectful of?

Phillips: Oh, the NVA, they were professional soldiers; there was no doubt about that. In fact, if we knew we were running into NVA soldiers, there was more trepidation involved than VC, because we knew the VC, they wouldn't fight too long, and then they'd just take off. They'd run away and hide, hide their

gun or something like that, but not the NVA. They'd stay until they were told to leave. They were good soldiers, dangerous.

DePue: You're checking your watch. Do we need to take a break here pretty soon?

Phillips: No, but noon.

DePue: I'd like to have you tell me about the awards you got, as best as you can tell me. You already mentioned that you don't have the actual award citations. First of all, explain to us why that's the case.

Phillips: When I got out of the Army from Hawaii, I got out on what they call temporary records. I don't know where my real records ever ended up because [of] the story about me being reassigned to Hawaii and all that. So, I never knew what happened to my actual records. They never got to Hawaii, from the time I was there. So when I actually got out of the Army, all I had was just the real basics of getting out. I had orders to get out and stuff like that. In fact, they even said on the form, they said, "The EM is being released on temporary records."

I knew a letter like that existed because he [the captain] told me he had written one. When did I get that? I've never really had seen my records. The reason I knew about the awards, especially those two I told you about, the Silver Star and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry, [was that] later I sent in to the Department of Defense to get medals, actual medals, like I have in my office.^{35, 36} They sent you back a letter, saying that you're authorized blah, blah, blah, blah for what medals you're authorized to have, and then they sent them back. That's the first I knew that I was authorized a Silver Star and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. But I can pretty well tell you...

That particular incident, when [I received] the Bronze Star... I just think it says that I've been in action all around all day long, something like that.

DePue: Would you like to read it into the record, or would you like me to read it?

Phillips: Go ahead.

³⁵ The Silver Star Medal, unofficially the Silver Star, is the United States Armed Forces' third-highest personal decoration for valor in combat. It is awarded primarily to members of the United States Armed Forces for gallantry in action against an enemy of the United States. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Silver_Star)

³⁶ The Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross, also known as the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross or Vietnam Cross of Gallantry is a military decoration of the former Government of South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam). The medal was created on August 15, 1950 and was awarded to military personnel, civilians, and Armed Forces units and organizations in recognition of deeds of valor or heroic conduct while in combat with the enemy. ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallantry_Cross_\(South_Vietnam\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gallantry_Cross_(South_Vietnam)))

DePue: This is dated twenty-three August 1970. It's signed by Gordon W. Anderson, Captain Infantry Commanding, and it's got his signature here.

Specialist 4 William Phillips—it gives your service number—has been attached to B Company as an aid man since March 1970. Due to his knowledge, ability to perform, and devotion to duty, Specialist 4 Phillips quickly became known and respected throughout the company.

And this is subject recommendation for promotion.

Phillips: Um-hmm.

DePue: That's standard boilerplate kind of language that they would always use.

Phillips: Yeah.

DePue: Paragraph two:

Specialist 4 Phillips was placed in the position of senior aid man to Company B, upon arrival to the company. The method he uses and supervision of the other four medics working with him are such that he causes them to perform willingly. He constantly checks and initiates action to correct medical problems as soon as possible. Specialist Phillips was recommended for the Bronze Star medal V for valor for his actions during enemy contact in April, 1970.

This would have been before you went to Cambodia.

Phillips: Probably.

DePue: So, you were already assigned to this company in April.

Specialist Phillips was in contact area the entire day, for a period of around nine hours, administering first-aid to the wounded men, with total disregard for his own safety. Many times he exposed himself to hostile fire while trying to aid the wounded men. Specialist Phillips was eligible for promotion at the time he was transferred to your unit.

I guess this was written to the medical holding company in Honolulu.

Phillips: Maybe that's how I ended up with it.

DePue: *He had been recommended for some time now. Unfortunately, he has not had a sufficient a number of allocations for promotion.*

And here's paragraph five.

Specialist Phillips is neat in appearance, courteous (laughs) and possesses...

Phillips: That's standard stuff too.

DePue: *...outstanding leadership ability. I feel that he is deserving a promotion and highly recommend him for such a position.*

Let's go back to paragraph three, recommended for Bronze Star Medal for Valor. Tell me about that.

Phillips: That day, as I recall it, was a day no different than any other day. The whole company, probably 100 plus of us, travelling in line. I'm in the middle. There's probably a lead platoon. I think there's four platoons in a company, A, B, C., and then we had a weapons platoon. The lead platoon, fairly early in the morning, ran into heavy duty fire. This wasn't this business of shooting the first two or three guys and taking off.

I remember the terrain. The terrain was that we went down the side of a hill, and there was a stream with some big rocks in the stream. Then they were going up the side of the opposite side, and the lead platoon, as soon as it pretty well deployed, ran into **heavy** fire, a lot of fire. This wasn't one or two guys. That medic was wounded, and then the medic right behind him, in the platoon after that, rushed right up there. Then he was wounded, trying to bring guys from on this side across to this side, where it was safe. But in order to do that...

These guys were all pinned down on the side of this hill because the enemy was at the top of the hill. They were all pinned down here, so any kind of movement there was extremely dangerous. My third medic came up from the back, and he went over there to do the same thing, and he was... I think he was killed. I had one killed and two wounded, and that just left me.

Captain said, "You're the only one left." I said, "I know." I said, "Just give me a couple of guys to go with me, to see if I can go up there. Maybe I can get some of those guys out of the line of fire." He sent two or three guys with me to give me cover and fire and that kind of stuff. You just go up there, and you grab one and take him back across the creek. There was a second one, maybe a third one; I don't know. You grab them by the jacket, drag them. It's not where you lift them. I'm not a really big person, so if it was a big guy, it was hard for me to just lift them. About the fourth time, my bodyguards or whatever, the guys who went with me, they were wounded or killed.

I was pretty well on my own then, except for the guys that were back here. I remember one stretch. I got this guy and I'm dragging him across the little stream, and there was a big rock there, and he got hit again as I'm dragging him. So I just stopped in the middle of the stream, behind the big rock, which was fairly safe. We stayed there for a while, and I administered

first-aid. I can remember taking out my canteen cup. I was going to get him some water and stuff like that, and they shot the damn thing right out of my hand. These guys were good. They shot my cup right out of my hand, and I thought, "Oh, me."

Of course, by this time... I couldn't carry my rifle and drag these guys too, so I'd left my rifle back in the back. All I had was the pistol, forty-five. That went on pretty much the rest of the day, until about 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon. Within a couple of hours, we'd brought in air support, even the jets. [That was] one of the few times we brought in jets, because they were pretty well entrenched on the top of this hill. We certainly weren't going to go over the hill, and we couldn't leave them [the wounded] there.

We just tried to outlast them [the enemy] and wait until dark. We figured they'd leave at night, and they did. But we gave them a good pasting, with gunships; even the jets dropped some napalm on them, which probably convinced them to not stay around much longer.

It was an all-day deal. It's just one of those things. You just go get a guy and bring him back. And there's another one yelling, "Doc, Doc, Doc, Doc. I'm wounded, wounded, wounded." You get up and go get another one.

DePue: But this is months later that he wrote this letter that mentioned that you had been recommended for the Bronze Star. Did you not even know that?

Phillips: He told me he was going to do that. I didn't see any paperwork. I remember now where I got that; he did send that to the medical holding company. I kept in communication with him for a little while, and I told him my story about not coming—

DePue: We'll get into that in a little bit.

Phillips: Yeah (laughs). He got a big chuckle over that one. But he said he wanted to make sure I was promoted. He didn't know I was already promoted to [specialist] 5.

DePue: How about the Silver Star? That's a pretty rare medal.

Phillips: Pretty much the same kind of situation. It was one of those all-day battles where we get up in the morning and we're going. I do not remember what we're looking for or where we are.

DePue: Was this in Nam or in Cambodia?

Phillips: No, that's not Cambodia. [We] ran into some heavy contact, much more than we would normally see. They stopped, and they were shooting it out with us, big group, thirty, forty, fifty or them, well entrenched too, not a hill this time, but they were well bunkered in, bunkers and stuff like that. We were trying to

flank them, and we couldn't get around them. Guys were getting wounded all over the place, just all over the place. I probably had four or five KIAs [killed in action], and my medics are getting wounded, not all of them, like the one time, but there was just a whole bunch of wounded guys. We'd just go get them, one at a time. I lost my rifle twice. You can't drag a person along and carry a rifle too, so I'd just sit my rifle there and just go get it.

DePue: So you were dragging these soldiers along, under fire?

Phillips: Oh, yeah.

DePue: And that's what elevated it to a Silver Star?

Phillips: I guess so, because they were shooting at me all the time. You can see the dirt and everything kicking up around you, around the trees and stuff like that. You're just hoping like, I've got to go get this guy, and they're just shooting the heck out of everybody and everything.

DePue: Would it have been Captain Anderson who wrote you up for it again?

Phillips: No, somebody else. I think it was a different captain. I had two captains. I think the six months for Captain Anderson... He was rotated.

DePue: Had ended?

Phillips: Yeah, ended before like that, August or something. There was a different captain from Oklahoma. He was a good guy too, a little more serious than—

DePue: You don't remember his name?

Phillips: Hmm, he was older, a professional soldier, from Oklahoma. He wasn't kind of like Captain Anderson, who was kind of like me, just a college kid who was (laughs) drafted. This next guy was serious, but he was okay.

DePue: In your mind, was there anything different, in terms of the level of courage that you showed, in the Silver Star incident from the Bronze Star?

Phillips: It's just a matter of being around enemy fire for a long period of time, almost a day, a whole day. And I probably brought back four or five guys that were wounded. You have to expose yourself to go get them, and they were trying to give me as much covering fire as they can, but nobody else was going to get up and run with me, I'll tell you; they're just not going to do that. And that's my job.

DePue: How about the medal you got from the Vietnamese?

Phillips: Well, I think that was when I was assigned with ARVN units. ARVN is the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. There were a couple of times there when I was basically the only medic in the area because they didn't have any.

I remember, one of their company commanders was wounded real bad. He was captain or major or something like that. I went to get him and brought him back out and stabilized him, and he lived. I thought it would be that.

But there was another time, when they said, "There'd been a chopper crash," and a high Vietnamese officer was in there, and they wanted me to go and see the situation. He was colonel or something. He was a very high officer. It had been shot down and some of the crew was alive, some of it was dead. They were all wounded, and there was some enemy fire and stuff like that. But I saved the colonel. He gave me his pistol. He said, "Here, you can have my pistol." I said, "Well, thanks." He spoke English. It might have been for that; I don't know. But there were occasions like that. [It] probably was that officer; he would do that. He probably would look me up and—

DePue: I know you also received the Air Medal.

Phillips: Yeah. Well, you get that for so many combat assaults, so many times you... This is in the infantry, and you get wings for being a crewman. The Air Medal you get for combat assaults. You had to be on sixteen combat assaults, where you're going to land with enemy fire so many times, and you'd get that.

DePue: That had nothing to do with being a medevac medic?

Phillips: No, no. The wings were.

DePue: Well, we have been at this for over two hours now, and we still have to talk about the whole experience in Hawaii. So it's your choice here. Would it be better if we postpone that to another session?

Phillips: Yeah, I think so. Let me show you some of the items I brought with me. Then I need to go to lunch, and then we can do this again. That's much less stressful to talk about, kind of cute actually.

DePue: It's a fascinating story in its own right.

Phillips: By golly.

DePue: I would encourage people to listen to the third session.

Phillips: It didn't happen for everybody.

DePue: We'll go ahead and stop today. Thank you very much, Bill.

Phillips: Okay.

(end of transcript #2)

Interview with William “Bill” Phillips

VRV-A-L-2013-019

Interview # 3: April 11, 2013

Interviewer: Mark R. DePue

COPYRIGHT

The following material can be used for educational and other non-commercial purposes without the written permission of the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. “Fair use” criteria of Section 107 of the Copyright Act of 1976 must be followed. These materials are not to be deposited in other repositories, nor used for resale or commercial purposes without the authorization from the Audio-Visual Curator at the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library, 112 N. 6th Street, Springfield, Illinois 62701. Telephone (217) 785-7955

Note to the Reader: Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that this is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, interviewee and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. The Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for the views expressed therein. We leave these for the reader to judge.

DePue: Today is Thursday, April 11, 2013. My name is Mark DePue, Director of Oral History with the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library. Today I’m in Springfield with Bill Phillips. Good morning, Bill.

Phillips: Good morning, good morning.

DePue: We’ve had two sessions so far. This will be our last session, and it’s all been about your experiences as a Vietnam veteran. This session, it’s going to take a peculiar turn. I’m looking forward to having you explain that to us. What I wanted to start with though is just a couple of wrap-up questions about your Vietnam experience. Were you ever actually injured yourself?

Phillips: No, I was never wounded. I had no punji sticks, which was common, or booby traps or anything like that. Although, I did contract some pretty exotic, what I call tropical diseases, the worst being malaria, which really started part of the next story you want to hear about, which was very common in Vietnam or any tropical area. We had medicine to keep from getting it. You would have to take a big pink pill once a week and a little white one every day. Each one of them stopped a different kind of malaria. I’m not sure I remember the names of them, vivax and falciparum, but that may not be right. It was very common for the soldiers to have jungle rot, which I had, which you just get it from being dirty all the time and can’t wash. It was just lesions on your hands and your arms and sometimes your face. I had jaundice, hepatitis, I forget.

DePue: Other than malaria, which we'll get to in a bit, were any of those so bad that they took you out of action?

Phillips: No, no, they didn't. I probably could have taken myself out of action because that was my role. It was my decision to determine who went to the rear. When I was with the infantry, it was the senior medic's decision to decide who should go back. We had a book; I call it a chit book. It was about the size of a bank book. On that book, we had pages, but we had little wire tabs on the end. Whatever the situation was, for the soldier, we would wire that to their jacket. Then when they went back, they could see what **my** assessment of the situation was and what I suggested or what I had done, especially with the wounded.

But even with the ones who were ill...and they were always trying to con me. In fact, there was a little trick they used to do with their feet. If you would spray mosquito repellent on your feet, it would give you like foot lesions. If you had like trench foot or something like that...although we were in water, not as much as they were down in the delta. They did that on purpose.

I even had soldiers... I can remember this vividly. I was walking, and the soldier

was up in a tree. I said, "What are you doing up in the tree?" And he said, "Watch," so he jumped down—it was fifteen feet or so—jumped down. I said, "What



Getting a bath in a stream was extremely rare. Elaborate security had to be set up for men to relax and enjoy themselves briefly.

said, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm trying to break my leg." "You're trying to break your leg?" (laughs) He said, "Yeah, I want to break my leg so I can get out of here." That's a true story. He was actually trying to do that. And I thought, Man, oh, man, somebody trying to break their leg to do that.

No, I was never wounded. Bullets came close; I know they did, but they didn't get me.

DePue: The situation you just talked about, with the soldier who was trying to break his leg (Phillips laughs), if he had been successful, would he have gotten a Purple Heart?

Phillips: It would have depended probably on my assessment. If I hadn't seen that, and he had a broken leg, and I thought, Well, he had a broken leg. I don't think you get a Purple Heart for a broken leg; that's not a combat wound.

DePue: Let's say you're on a landing strip. You're jumping out a helicopter, and you manage to break your leg.

Phillips: Well, that would be different.

DePue: Then you'd get a Purple Heart for that?

Phillips: Yes. And we had that. In fact, our company first sergeant came out, very rarely, by the way, that rank. We didn't see the majors and the higher NCOs too often. But he did, and that's exactly what he did. He jumped out and broke his ankle. They put him right back on the same helicopter, and that was that. So it happened. They probably would get a Purple Heart, but I don't control the Purple Hearts. They make a decision.

DePue: "They" being the chain of command?

Phillips: Well, in the hospitals, I think, they make a decision about who gets the Purple Hearts, based upon your wound and whatever caused it.

DePue: Would you have to be evacuated to be considered to earn one?

Phillips: I would assume.

DePue: The reason I'm asking is because I assume you're walking through the brush; you're exposed to all kind of dangers; you're in rugged territory. There's all kinds of scrapes and bruises and lacerations that are occurring to these guys.

Phillips: Oh yes, but that's not Purple Heart stuff. That happened all the time. Or they'll get ill. Jungle rot sure is not going to get you a Purple Heart or jaundice, or even malaria.

DePue: How about if you're in enemy fire, and you got a grazing wound, the kind of thing that wouldn't take you out of action, but there was blood involved?

Phillips: Probably not. I would say no. If they didn't leave the field, or they weren't sent back or something like that, and they just stayed, I would say no.

DePue: You've talked about it before. You're exposed to danger almost all the time when you're there, especially when you're on patrol. How do you deal with the fear?

Phillips: Well, that's a excellent question. That's probably the most pervasive thing that I remember is just being... You just wake up scared. You're scared when you're sleeping. You're supposed to dig a hole at night, if you have time. Sometimes you didn't have time. But you are; you're afraid.

I can remember just walking down the trail. We stopped, and I was talking to someone. The guy I was talking to got shot, right in the head, just "boom," just like that. He wasn't three feet from me, killed just that quick. I barely had time to jump down. Of course, there wasn't any more shooting after that. It was just him.

The thing we were afraid of, or at least me, I was afraid of being wounded or maimed, seriously, like a leg blown off or an arm blown off or... I don't know, something disfiguring or something like that. Those are the scary ones. Just to be standing there and "boom" it's all gone. You don't have time to be afraid.

DePue: Yet when you're there, you're expected to perform. Was that an important way to get beyond the fear?

Phillips: Well, I just tried to do my job at the time and assess every situation that would come up and look at it. You don't want to do silly things or expose yourself to danger. My job was to go get people when the firing was going on. Everybody else is hunkered down behind anything they could get behind, a rock, a tree, anything. But when they're wounded... unless I just made a judgment that it was just too dangerous for me to make a move like that. There may have been an occasion or two like that. But you hate to do that because they're yelling out and crying, crying.

DePue: You got a Silver Star and a Bronze Star for valor, for putting yourself at risk. What was the toughest part about your service in Nam?

Phillips: Well, I would say the toughest part for me was kind of putting the whole thing together. I was kind of more politically savvy than most of the soldiers. Most of them were pretty young. Most of them were seventeen, eighteen years old. They were just either from high school or out of high school or whatever. But I could see this thing was not winnable, the way we were doing it. It just wasn't happening. That really bothered me, that we're out there making all these sacrifices, and then you see the student protests in the back, in the country. They not only don't want you to be there, but they actively whatever.

So that bothered me. And the pervasive fear. I thought, Well, I'm pretty young to be in a situation like this. Then you think, and you kind of go back on your life, Well, what caused me to be in this position? What caused me to be here now? Could I have done something different or whatever? But then you kind of go through that, and you just try to go through each day. Each day was different.

There were a lot of days when just nothing happened. We’d just walk and walk and walk and not find anything, not see anything, and just sweat and sweat and sweat. There were a lot of days like that. They’re just not going anywhere, not a clue where you are, no towns, no references, up-hill, down-hill, across streams. It made very little difference. We had no frame of reference as to where we were, just none. And I’m thinking, What in the world?



This should give the casual reader some idea of the equipment that a soldier in Vietnam carried. It was heavy, and the soldiers learned, carefully, how to only pack what they needed and nothing extra. The bottle on Phillips’ helmet was mosquito repellent, which was not effective.

Then if we had a firefight, and they would stop and shoot it out with us, we’d win—and we always ended up winning—then we’d just leave the next day. Whatever the heck we were fighting over, a hill or whatever, we’d just leave. The next day or a week or two or three days from now. I’m thinking, My gosh. It just seemed like it was kind of a...

There was no ultimate goals. Like in World War II, the goal was to get to Berlin or get to Tokyo or whatever. I’m not so sure if they had goals in Korea. I think there, it was pretty much like us. But we would fight and fight and fight and fight, and nobody seemed to care. I couldn’t see an end goal, a winnable goal for us.

DePue: What was the casualty rate for medics, in comparison to your average grunt?

Phillips: Well, I would say at that time, and even reading about it later, probably the most dangerous jobs was helicopter pilot and a medic. Those seemed to be the two most dangerous ones. Now, helicopter pilots had some built-in protection, with armored seats and so on and so forth, but they really put themselves in danger, and the people who flew with them, like me for a little while.

And medics, it’s just the nature of the job. If there is a firefight, everybody is hunkered down or moving, flanking this, left or right or whatever. But you have to get up and move to people that are wounded, regardless of the situation. It’s just your job. And so I would say [the] mortality rate had to be pretty hefty. I think that’s why the guys really kind of looked up to us or kind of protected us when they could.

As I told you before, we didn't have to do some routine things that were dangerous, that other people had to do, like walking point and going into tunnels and bunker complexes and things like that because they were always filled with booby traps and whatever. We didn't have to do things like that. So they kind of gave us a break. But it was high; it just was.

I lost my rifle three times. In some of the pictures, you'll see me wearing a pistol. That's because I couldn't carry my rifle and guys at the same time. So I'd put my rifle down and then, by the time I got back to it, it was gone or whatever. I don't know if somebody else picked it up or what. So, I ended up carrying a pistol a lot of times **and** a rifle. You don't want to look too different, so I tried to be careful not to look too different from everybody else.

DePue: One of the things I would assume you looked forward to a lot was an R&R [rest and recuperation]. Did you get a chance to go on R&R?

Phillips: I did get an R&R. I believe it was in August. Your tour is a year, and you try not to go, certainly in the first half of the year. When you go is basically up to you. You decide. I don't think they'd let you go within the first three months, but I think after that it was up to you. I'd been there maybe eight months, nine months, whatever, and [got] my chance for R&R.

Of course, there were different places you could go. You could go to Bangkok, or you could go to Tokyo, or you could go to Singapore, or you could go to Australia, or you could go to Hawaii. Most of the married guys would go to Hawaii, try to meet their wife. The other places were a little more exotic in their offering than Hawaii. The married guys would go to Hawaii.

So I put in for my R&R and went to Hawaii. I think I have a thing or two in my little book there from Hawaii. There's a little card you get when you first get there. It's supposed to be five days long. I don't think they paid for my wife's ticket; I don't recall that. But they facilitated it anyway, told her when I was going to be there, and how...

DePue: During the time that you were on R&R the first few days, were you talking to your wife much about the war?

Phillips: As I told you, yes and no. I felt a need to try to tell her some of my experiences and whatever, without giving her a lot of anguish or anything like that. I just felt the need to tell somebody. I think the reason I did that was in case I didn't come back, I wanted her to know something about what happened, other than what I was writing.

DePue: I assume you weren't telling her things like, "Being a medic is one of the more dangerous jobs over there."

Phillips: No, no. But I did tell her basically what I was doing and what my role was.

DePue: Did you share with her any of your doubts about the way we were fighting the war or what you were doing there, the things we just talked about?

Phillips: Yeah, I did, because she was very receptive to that. She really didn't care for me being in that military at all, period. So I kind of shared with her just my personal political doubts about this. But then you have to kind of couple that with, well heck, you're out there doing that now. Maybe you're just thinking that way because you're out here doing it now, and you don't want to be out here doing that now.

So we did, but I really tried to ask her more things about what was going on back home than over there. I didn't want to tell her about the day-to-day stuff. She wasn't interested in that, never was interested in that, as a matter of fact. We never talked about that, even after the war, ever.

DePue: Was there any discussion about trying to convince you not to go back?

Phillips: No. She'd given up on that idea because she'd told me that the first two opportunities, when I went into the Army or I got orders for Vietnam. We didn't talk about that. I was interested to see what had happened and kind of to renew our relationship and see how that was faring when you're gone a long time and everything.

DePue: You hadn't been married all that long before you deployed, had you?

Phillips: A year.

DePue: So was it a pleasant R&R for you?

Phillips: It was, yes. We would go out and eat, and we went on the beach a couple of times and just laid on the beach and talked. She wasn't a big beach person that likes to hang out on the beach or whatever; she just wasn't. But it was a beautiful place and safe and no problems.

DePue: At what point in the R&R do you start worrying about having to go back again?

Phillips: Well, I didn't hardly get that chance because about two days into it I woke up at night, in the motel where we were staying with a big fever, big time fever. I pretty well knew, when you get a fever like that, and you get shakes, and you get cold uncontrollably, even in a warm environment and whatever, that's symptomatic of malaria, when you get that.

My initial inclination was just to try to just kind of ride out the fever, because I knew it lasted a certain amount of time. But then it seemed to get worse, so I thought, Oh my gosh, I'm going to miss my whole rest of R&R laying in bed here, shaking, whatever. Really, she kind of convinced me that, "You ought to do something about this." I really didn't know where to go. I

just guessed. I knew there was a big hospital complex in Honolulu, called Tripler. You could see it; it was up on a hill.

I decided I'll go there and see what they say. I thought maybe they'll do something, and I can finish the rest of my R&R. The doctors looked at me and said, "Nope, you're in here. You're not going anywhere." I never got back out again to be with her. She came to see me the rest of the R&R sometimes. When the five days were up, she went home as she was scheduled to do, and I didn't. I didn't go back to where I was scheduled to go because it was a two-week period of medication and watching it after that.

DePue: Was this typical for somebody with malaria, or did you have a different kind of malaria than many?

Phillips: I don't know. There's two kinds. One's more serious than the other, and I'm not sure. I had vivax, and I'm not sure if that's more serious than the other one or not. But anyway, yes. If you had malaria and you had fever like that, even out in the field, I would send you back, and you'd stay at least two weeks in a hospital, so they could watch you and so forth. But if you get the cerebral malaria, then you could die. They wanted to make sure you didn't have that. I don't know how you get that, as adverse to the others or whatever, but I knew it existed.

DePue: Your timing in this case wasn't necessarily the greatest. You go on R&R, and you get malaria.

Phillips: No. No, it wasn't. (laughs) And it was my job to hand out the pills. I got to thinking back, and I said, Well, did you take your own stupid pills when you were supposed to, when you were handing them out? I thought I had. But maybe I hadn't or whatever. Anyway, I missed my rotation to go back after your normal five-day period. You just go back to your unit and resume whatever it is you were doing, wherever they are; you pick them up someplace.

DePue: We're going to talk more about what happened once you were in the hospital, but for the two or three days that you were not in the hospital, on R&R I assume you were wearing civilian clothes?

Phillips: Yeah, uh-hmm.

DePue: How did the civilian population in Hawaii treat the Vietnam veterans?

Phillips: I don't recall them saying much to us. I was pretty well tanned, but then everybody is in Honolulu. I didn't seem to stand out. She had brought over clothes for me because you don't have any civilian clothes. I didn't have any. So she brought over some clothes that I wore. I don't recall anybody making a big deal about that.

DePue: Would you describe Honolulu as a military town?

Phillips: Yeah, oh yeah. They had a huge naval base there, and there were a lot of Marines there too and an Army base; there was a Fort Shafter, which was a Pacific command headquarters. In fact, that was our patch later. It's a blue patch with the Hawaiian Islands on it. Then there was Fort DeRussy, which was really nice. Fort DeRussy was a fort right on Waikiki Beach. The Army owned it, so they had their own beach; it was, wow. The value of that property must have been astronomical because it was right on Waikiki Beach, and the Army owned it.

Hawaii was nice. The weather was just superb, not too hot, not too cold. It's not like Vietnam where it was oppressively hot. This was...had a nice breeze all the time. [It was] a little on the expensive side, but you really don't care about that [for] a few days.

DePue: What happened when you were in the hospital for a couple of weeks?

Phillips: You're just in the hospital. I had a bed, and there were other guys in there for various things and whatever. It was a huge complex. Then after about, I would say, the first three or four days, the fever had really subsided, and there's not much in the way of symptoms after that. They're just double checking you. So it came close to the time when I was supposed to rotate back, even after my two-week period in the hospital. That's when the sergeant came in to see me.

He came into our ward, and he said, "Can anybody here type?" Well, you don't volunteer for a whole lot in the Army, but I was pretty bored. I was bored stiff not doing anything, so I told him I could. I just put my little house shoes on with my pajamas and my overcoat and went down to a little room about this size. Had a typewriter in there and a bunch of cards, empty cards and then cards that people had filled out, to be assigned to the hospital. They come in and fill out a card, and then you make them an ID card for the hospital, and they wear it.

DePue: Are these employees or patients?

Phillips: Employees, doctors and different medical people, different ranks and whatever. He had, oh, 100 or better of those cards there. I thought, Well. He said, "Can you type this information on these cards?" It was the old type typewriter; you put them [the cards] in and turn it [the sheet roller]. It wasn't even electric; it was manual. So I did that.

He came back a while later, and all the cards were done, and I was just sitting there. He looked at the cards, and he said, "Well, that's pretty good." Then he just started talking to me. He sat down, and he just started talking to me. "Where are you from? What are you doing? What are you here for? What did you do before the war?" all that. We probably talked for forty-five minutes to an hour, just talking. He was asking me questions and stuff like that. He

was very nice, and he said, "You wait here a minute." I said, "Okay." I wasn't going anywhere. (both laugh)

He came back. It was maybe another forty-five minutes later, and he said, "You know, I think I've got a proposition for you." I thought, "Hmm, what kind of proposition?" The proposition was, he said, "We could really use people like you, people with degrees." He said, "A lot of the clerks we get here are just high school kids, and they can't type. They just can't do any kind of organizing of office work or anything like that." He said, "I think you probably could." I said, "I probably could do that without a problem."

He said, "Here's the proposition. First of all, we're going to change your orders, and you don't have to go back to Vietnam." That peaked my interest right away. He said, "Second, we're going to assign you to the personnel office here at the hospital—which I guess was his area—and we're going to change your MOS [military occupation code] from being a medic to a personnel clerk, or at least a secondary MOS, and we're going to promote you." I said, "Gee, you can do all that? How can you do that? You're a general. You can't do all that."

DePue: You mean a sergeant.

Phillips: He's just a sergeant. He said, "I can do that." (both laugh) I said, "Well, if you're asking me if I'm going to accept," I said, "I do. I'm in, no problem. That all sounds good to me." So slowly and surely... I still became a member of what's called the medical holding company. I never got out of that, which means that you're kind of in the hospital, but they're holding you there for some reason. They're not sending you back to your unit. I did that the whole rest of the time I was there.

DePue: That was the technicality that the sergeant was able to get around to keep you.

Phillips: I guess so. I didn't really care, and he did promote me to another rank.

DePue: And what was the rank?

Phillips: A five, E5.

DePue: A specialist 5th class?

Phillips: Uh-huh. I was up for a promotion anyway, as you saw in that letter, but they didn't have a spot or whatever at the time. That was my rank. Then slowly but surely, I got clothes, khakis that you wear all the time. There were two kinds of khakis if I remember correctly. The first kind was the kind the Army gives you, which is those ones that are just like really starchy, uncomfortable, paper-like. And then there was the kind that they all seemed to wear, the medical people, which was much softer and had nice creases in it automatically and all that. I thought, Wow. I got some of those. Those were

really nice. And I got the rest of the uniform that I would need, the shoes and all that, hats.

I just started working in the personnel office. They'd give you routine jobs to do. They were pretty routine. There wasn't a whole lot to it, organize this, do this and that, and do this and that. Pretty soon I kind of rose through the ranks of people that they were trusting with certain jobs to do and stuff like that. I think they liked it that I was a medic from Vietnam too, which kind of made them look good, that they had somebody there who'd actually been there, which was kind of unusual. In fact, they would ask me about it a lot, the guys that worked in the office, because none of them had ever been there.

DePue: Did you have to contact your unit back in Nam?

Phillips: I didn't do anything. They did; I assume they did. I asked them about that a couple of times. I said, "I don't want to go back there and find out they got me for deserting or anything like that." "Oh, don't worry about that. Oh, you're fine, blah, blah, blah." I remember, one day, I was walking down the street in Honolulu. It must have been a weekend or something.

I saw a guy that I had known from my unit, not real well, but he knew me. He was with his wife. He stopped and said, "Holy shit, there's Phillips, the guy who went on R&R and never came back." He was telling me, he said, "You're famous back there." He said, "You're one of the only people they ever heard of who went on R&R and never came back, and it was legit." (both laugh)

DePue: Did you feel at all guilty about not going back?

Phillips: No, not a bit.

DePue: Did you sense any resentment from him?

Phillips: No. He said, "Boy," He said, "That is a famous story out there, of doing that." And guys seemed to think, "Man, if I that could just happen to me," or something like that. Anytime that kind of thing happened to someone, you felt good for them. That's the only person I ever saw, at the time, who I knew from before, had seen me and talked to me. I talked to him for about an hour, and that was kind of interesting, what was different. By the time... I don't know how late that was, but they were pulling out the entire division by that time. The entire division didn't last six more months, after I left, and it was gone.

DePue: As we talked before, this is during the Vietnamization and of the drawdown of the American forces there. Was your wife able to join you there?

Phillips: That's an interesting story and question. I asked that repeatedly, and she wouldn't come, didn't come, wouldn't come, didn't happen anyway.

DePue: Would she have been on her own if she came over? The military wasn't going to find her quarters?

Phillips: Oh, yeah, they would. They probably would have done the same for me as anybody who was assigned there, as far as quarters. You get some kind of quarters or a quarters allowance anyway, when your wife is there. A lot of guys at the hospital, their wives were there.

DePue: How did you make sense of her not wanting to join you? What was she telling you?

Phillips: At that particular time, we became a little farther and farther apart. It was a little bit more than miles. We just drifted apart, and she didn't want to. I wanted to, and I couldn't get home, of course. She could have. If I remember correctly—she's a teacher too—I think she had a teaching job. She would have had to given that up, but she did that at least once earlier, anyway. When I was down in Texas, she came to Texas in medical school to stay with me, and she gave up a teaching job. But it didn't happen, being such a beautiful place and kind of really being relieved as how everything turned out. But personally, it just didn't work out for me. That was pretty sad.

DePue: The months that you were in Vietnam, it sounds like you saw a lot of action, saw a lot of blood and gore. Did you have any symptoms that we would now describe as PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder]?

Phillips: Yes and no. There were occasions when I would go to sleep, and then you wake up, and it's kind of in the dark, and you have that same feeling of when you woke up in the dark before. Until you acclimatize to your circumstances... Okay, I'm fine now. I'm in a hospital in Hawaii. I'm not back there. Once in a while...

I had one recurring dream, but that was really later; that was some years later. The recurring dream only was that I would see faces of guys I knew, no bodies, just faces. That's it, just faces. I don't think they even said anything to me, but it was just their faces. I finally figured out that all the faces were faces of guys who were killed, all of them. I think there were three of them. That kind of disturbed me. In fact, I asked someone to help me with that, later, later, later on.

DePue: Roughly what year, do you recall?

Phillips: That was eighties, maybe ten years afterwards. But when I got back, professionally, my life expanded fairly quickly. I was going back to school to get my master's degree—

DePue: This was when you came back to the United States.

Phillips: Yeah... a little teaching. Then I moved right into administration and moved right into being a superintendent and all that. So I was really busy professionally. But I don't think I had any crying jags or anything like that or go off your nut or—

DePue: Crying jags?

Phillips: Crying jags, yeah, where you just cry uncontrollably about it.

DePue: Is that Vietnam lingo?

Phillips: Yeah, yeah. We had some guys have crying jags. It just means that they just cry uncontrollably about whatever. A lot of times, actually what you do is, is that you just sit next to them and sometimes even put your arm around them, sort of like their mother. They were just scared; they were just scared. And I've heard of crying jags when guys get back. They just propel themselves back and are scared. Don't ever let any veteran who was in combat tell you they weren't scared when they were there, because that's not true. (laughs) It would be impossible.

DePue: Let's take you back to this pretty cool job that you've landed in Hawaii, being in the personnel section. Is that pretty much the end of the story?

Phillips: Actually I'd been there a while, and I was in the office one day, just doing my normal thing. It was a pretty busy office. We probably had, whew, fifteen or twenty guys doing things like I was doing, different kinds of things. Then there were senior sergeants and junior officers galore there. They were all in the medical corps or the medical... What did they call it? Not medical corps, but there seemed to be an office version for the medical corps, medical service? I forget. They had a different little thing in their caduceus than the others.³⁷ You just do your routine job, and that's really all you're doing. You just do a routine office job, eight hours a day, and then you're done, and you come back and do it the next day.

Well, one day a officer came in, a captain, I believe, who I'd not met nor seen or whatever. He was asking people, and he finally ended up with me, and he said, "Well, are you Sergeant Phillips?" I said, "Yes, sir." He said, "Were you a school teacher?" I said, "Yes, sir." (laughs) I figured, what's he want to know about that for? He said, "I have something for you to do this evening," or "We want you to volunteer to do this," or something like that. It was one of those things like, "We want you to do this, and you're going to do it, but it's not really in the course of your duty here." I thought, Well, okay. It sure will break the monotony, anyway. He said, "Yeah, there'll be a car down there in front of the hospital about 6:30 or something like that tonight." He

³⁷ The caduceus is the traditional symbol of Hermes and features two snakes winding around an often winged staff. The modern use of the caduceus as a symbol of medicine became established in the United States in the late 19th and early 20th century. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caduceus_as_a_symbol_of_medicine)

said, "It'll be a staff car. There will be a sergeant driving." And he said, "He'll be waiting for you." I said, "Okay." I was kind of waiting for the rest of the story, and that's all he said.

I'm running through my mind here. I said [to myself], What are we talking, spies here or what? (both laugh) Am I going to be in the CIA or what? (laughs) I go down there, and I sit up front with the sergeant, instead of sitting in the back. He wanted me to sit in the back. I said, "No, I'll just sit up front." He takes me to this house on the beach, I mean **on** the beach, right on the beach. It's a beautiful house.

DePue: Is this on a military post or off?

Phillips: It's off. It was in a beautiful neighborhood. I can't imagine what the house was worth then or now, unbelievable. But it was a beautiful house and very well-kept. You could tell a person of substance lived there. He said, "Just go on out, and just knock on the door." Okay.

I knocked on the door, and this lady answered. She's a grey-haired lady, maybe fifty-five, sixty, very elegant looking, soft spoken. She said, "Are you Sergeant Phillips?" I said, "Yes, ma'am." She said, "Well, come on in." We kind of walked through the house, with a little small talk. She said, "I'm going to let you sit in the library until the general gets here." She said, "He'll be down in a few minutes."

That's the first mention I've heard of the general. (both laugh) I thought that something's a little strange here. I sat there... a little small talk. She still had small talk with me. "Where were you? What'd you do?" That sort of thing, before the war and all that, even a little bit about Vietnam, but not much. Then the general came down, his green uniform, and he sat down.

He said, "Just sit down. I just want to talk to you." "Okay." I just sat there, kind of on the edge of my seat, not all the way back with your legs crossed and all that, kind of nervous. But he really put me at ease. He said, "This is something that you would be doing to help me personally." He started laying out the story about his daughter, who was about fifteen, fourteen or fifteen. I think she was a freshman in high school, wild. She was a handful, I guess, for the general. I think she was an only child, because he didn't mention any others, and I didn't see any pictures of any others, so I think that was the only one they had.

DePue: You haven't told us the name of the general.

Phillips: Milburn, Conn Milburn [General Conn L. Milburn, Jr.] was his name.

DePue: What was his job?

Phillips: He was the commanding officer at Tripler, Tripler Army Medical Center. He was a two-star general, and he was **the** man at the hospital.

DePue: Did you recognize him when he came in then?

Phillips: I'd seen his picture in the halls (both laugh) like that. I hadn't seen him.

DePue: You mean sergeants in the personnel section?

Phillips: No, I didn't run across him very often, not even in passing did I see him. I knew where his office was, way high up on one of the floors, but I didn't know it.

We just talked, and he said, "What I want you to do is this." He said, "I want you to..." and he said, "You don't have to do this if you don't want." He said, "I don't want you to think of this as I'm telling you, you have to do this." He said, "But I need a school teacher to help my daughter with her homework, because she's just not doing very well, sort of as a tutor, if you will." And he said, "You'd probably come out here two nights a week." I think it was a Tuesday and a Thursday I would go out there and spend about two hours with her, just going over her homework, down in different rooms, usually the library-type room.

We got acquainted, and she was kind of brassy and flippant. She knew her dad was the commanding general and blah, blah, blah. She was cute, and she was in Hawaii, so she was having a heck of a time. I think studying was the last thing she had on her agenda to do. (both laugh) So it was kind of touchy, but we came to an understanding right away that my job was to just try to help her with her homework. If she'd just gather it up and bring it down, we'd talk about it.

I'd look at things that she'd written in English or whatever and kind of help her with it. If she had a certain assignment that was coming up, maybe I could help her organize how to do it, find material, whatever. We got along good. We just came to an understanding, and it was no problem. She liked to ask me about home. I don't think she cared much about Vietnam, but... That was okay.

Then, it was a little while later, one time I came, and the general's wife was really nice to me. She was such a peach. I would come there, and she'd have laid out like cookies, plates of cookies that she'd made and milk or orange juice. It was really homey. She was nice; she was just a nice lady. And the general came down. Every now and then, he'd pop in and say, "How are you guys doing?" and blah, blah, blah. "Okay. No problem."

It was a little while later, he came in one night. I was getting ready to leave, and he said, "Before you leave, come on into the library," or whatever that room was where he was all the time, where his desk was. He said, "This

has really gone better than I expected.” He said, “She’s a hard nut to crack, so I’m glad you’ve made progress with her. Her grades are better. She’s not doing what she could do. I’m not sure she’ll ever do what she can do. But she’s doing better, and you’re a big help, and I appreciate it.” He said, “I’d really like for you to just come and work in my office now, instead of in the big personnel office.” I said, “That would be fine, sir, no problem.” (laughs)

DePue: Were you saying that because you just don’t argue with a general?

Phillips: No. You don’t, no. And it sounded pretty good to me anyway. The job I was doing was pretty routine. There wasn’t a lot of thinking to it. So then I went up to the general’s office and started doing some routines there. It wasn’t long that I became, more or less, the office manager for the non-NCOs. There was a gaggle of officers there too. He had a staff of, whew, I don’t know, twenty, twenty-five people. There were six or seven officers and the rest NCOs of various ranks. I don’t think there’s anybody below me, sergeant. That’s about the lowest guy. I was low guy on the totem pole there. But the general liked me.

So I became the person that, when you go in to see the general, I was the guy. I kept his office book, his appointments and stuff like that and would schedule trips that he was going to go on and go here and there and there and blah, blah, blah.

DePue: In many worlds, that’s a pretty powerful position.

Phillips: It is. I’ll tell you a story about just how powerful it can be, and this is very instructive. One day I was in the office, and this colonel, full-bird colonel, comes in.³⁸ He’s just hopping mad. He’s just jumping up and down, and he said he wants to see the general. The general had told me before this, “I don’t want to see anybody for a while. I don’t want to see **anybody** for a little while.” So this colonel, he was very insistent. “Well, I want to see the general, and I’m colonel whatever of—he was a medical doctor, as they all were, a lot of them—blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.” I said, “No, you’re not getting in to see the general. He’s busy right now.” I said, “I’d be glad to make an appointment.” He just kept on yelling and stuff like that.

Finally, the general came out of his office. He said, “What’s all this yelling about?” And I said, “Sir, this colonel what’s-his-name insists on seeing you, and I told him that you can’t see him right now, you’re busy, and I’ll be glad to make an appointment.” So the colonel starts to huff and puff, and he says, “What’s your name, colonel?” He’d forgotten already, so he said

³⁸ A full bird colonel is a member of the United States armed forces having the rank of full colonel, as distinct from a lieutenant colonel. Colonels are sometimes referred to (but not addressed as) full colonels, bird colonels, or full bird colonels because lieutenant colonels are also referred to and addressed in correspondence as "colonel." ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonel_\(United_States\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colonel_(United_States)))

that. The general said, "What's your situation?" He said, "Well, I've just been assigned here and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. They didn't give me whatever I wanted." He said, "Don't you worry about it, because you're not going to be assigned here next week. You're going to Greenland."

I looked, and it immediately hit me that this is a full-bird colonel who'd just been assigned to Hawaii, and the general just instantly assigned him to Greenland. I thought, That's pretty instructive (both laugh). That was a classic story. In the Army, generals are very... I can remember before, I'm not even sure I saw a general before Hawaii. I might have. I saw a lot of colonels and majors, but not generals. They're just... They have a rank almost in the stratosphere or something like that.

DePue: So, there was a different aura about a general than a colonel?

Phillips: Oh, my gosh. Generals, even the word, I think, just denotes power or influence or whatever.

DePue: As far as you know, did the colonel end up in Greenland?

Phillips: He did, by golly. I took down what the general had said, and I took it down to the personnel office—kind of happily—in person. I said that this guy had just been assigned here, and I said, "Don't even bother getting him started here, because he's going to Greenland." I told this major or whoever that transfers people. He said, "What am I going to do with him in Greenland?" I said, "Hey, I don't know, but he's supposed to go to Greenland. (both laugh) That's up to you, major."

DePue: I would assume you can pretty much ride out the rest of your time in the Army in this tour.

Phillips: Yeah.

DePue: And when did that come up?

Phillips: It came up around Christmas.

DePue: Of 1970?

Phillips: Yeah, it came up around Christmas, New Year's and whatever. The general came in to see me one day, or came out and talked to me. He said, "I know that you can get out of the Army fairly soon." He said, "I know you were drafted and all the things you went through over there, but I've really grown attached to you." And he said, "I'd like for you to stay with me and work with me." He said, "If you'll do that, I'll make you a second lieutenant, (snaps fingers) just like that, no OCS [officer candidate school], no nothing. I'll just make you a second lieutenant, and then you stay with me. I'll stay in the Army two, three, four more years, not too much longer. And by that time, you

might be a first lieutenant, captain, whatever. You'll go with me wherever I go, wherever, as part of my personal staff." And he said, "When I retire if you don't want to stay doing what you're doing or wherever it is, I'll send you wherever you want to go, Germany, Japan, the States, Hawaii, wherever."

I thought, Wowie, what an opportunity. All this time, I'm still working on my relationship with my wife, which wasn't going very good. I knew that, if I stayed in the Army, that was it. There was no fixing it, if I stayed in the Army; that was gone. But I wanted to. So that was my decision. I thought about it for a little while, and then finally I told the general, "I'm going to get out and go home." He kind of knew, because we'd even talked on a personal level about that.

DePue: Did you talk to your wife at all about this decision you had to make?

Phillips: I mentioned it once or twice, and she more or less said, "Well, that's fine. You go ahead and do that, and then that will be it." The choice was pretty clear. See, there was no promise of fixing it, even if I went home. I didn't know that, even if I got home, I could fix it or if it was fixable or whatever, but that's what I decided to do, so I got out.

DePue: From what I saw in your records, you were discharged in January of seventy-one, and the other interesting thing you'd already mentioned was the 4th Infantry Division rotated back from Vietnam to Fort Carson, Colorado on a pretty interesting date, December 7, 1970. (Phillips laughs)

Phillips: Yeah. I left them in August, and they didn't last much longer. I think, pretty much as I left them, they really started drawing back. I can remember them in the midst of shutting down our big division base camp in Pleiku and handing it over to the ARVNs and all the buildings and everything that went with it.

DePue: You're discharged in January. Give me a thumbnail sketch of what happened in your life after that.

Phillips: Basically, I had been a teacher before going into the Army, so I knew that my employer had to give me a position in teaching when I was out. But, of course, this was in the middle of a school year. So I went to see the superintendent of the district where I'd been a teacher, and I said, "Look, I'm out of the Army, and I know that you're supposed to provide me with a job. But I also know you probably don't have any jobs in the middle of the school year." I said, "Just think about me when you're starting to employ people for next year, and I'll find something to do between now and then." Then he said, "Well, let's see," and he started thinking quickly in his head. He said, "Come and see me tomorrow morning." So I came to see him tomorrow morning, and they sort of put together, they cobbled together a job for me to do, with special reading instruction and stuff like that for poor learners and stuff.

DePue: What was the school district again?

Phillips: It was in Pontiac. So I went back and started teaching and immediately started going back to school on the GI Bill.³⁹ I already had my bachelor's, so I got my master's pretty quickly and then got into administration. I was principal [at a] pretty young age, at twenty-five years old. That's pretty young.

DePue: At what level?

Phillips: I was principal of two buildings, K-6 [kindergarten through 6th grade] in Streator, Illinois. In fact, in both buildings there wasn't a person that was younger than me. I was the youngest person that worked in both buildings.

DePue: Did your Vietnam experience help in terms of the level of maturity in dealing with these people?

Phillips: I think it did. I think it did. It didn't bother me for a second. It didn't bother me that I was so young, and everybody there was older than me. It just didn't.

I was a principal for four years and continued to go to school. Then I knew, somewhere along the line, after being a principal for four years, which is kind of middle management, I wanted to be a superintendent. This is what I want to do. So I finally got my certificate to be a superintendent and so forth and got a job when I was twenty-nine years old, the youngest superintendent in Illinois at the time, which I thought was pretty cool. But I went from a big district to a little tiny district.

DePue: Where was that?

Phillips: It's called Braceville. It's up by Dwight. It was a little tiny district, very poor. Actually, I got the same pay for being a superintendent and principal, which I was, than I did for just being a principal in a bigger district. But I wanted to get started, so I did. Then I was the superintendent in five districts for twenty-six years after that.

DePue: You don't need to go into much detail, but you probably need to finish the story about the relationship with your wife.

Phillips: We got back together when I came back home. She had our car—we had purchased a car before—and she was living with her parents. I came down with my parents. My goal was to just either sit down and try to work this out, or I was going to take the car, because I was the one that was paying for it, and that would be that.

The day we came down with my parents and her parents, who knew each other, we talked most of the day. We both determined that we should just

³⁹ Officially the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, the G.I. Bill was created to help veterans of World War II. It established hospitals, made low-interest mortgages available and granted stipends covering tuition and expenses for veterans attending college or trade schools. (<https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/gi-bill>)

try to not worry about that and start over, and we did. We're together and had two children and lived together for a long time. She went into teaching—she was a teacher anyway—and I went my way, with administration. We made several moves.

DePue: I want to kind of wrap things up here. But there are quite a few questions I do want to ask you about.

Vietnam, that era, the 1960s and early seventies, was a very traumatic time for the United States.

Phillips: Yeah it was.

DePue: Have your views on the Vietnam War and that whole experience evolved over the many years since then?

Phillips: Well no, but I've had a lot of time to sit and reflect on it. When I was there, even though I knew, politically, what was happening, and I had my views on it, I was pretty busy just trying to do my job and not worry about any greater scheme of things or whatever. But things like...

When I got out of the Army in Oakland, California, I remember them telling me, "With your uniform and your medals and so forth, I wouldn't hang around the airport here, because people are not real pleasant to returning Vietnam veterans." I found that very disconcerting. I'm a returning Vietnam veteran, and I did what people asked me to do and all this other stuff. And now people not only don't appreciate it, but absolutely the opposite. They would be yelling at you. I can remember being called, let's see, what did they call me? Baby killer, I think, baby killer.

DePue: Can you give us some more details about that? Where was this, and what were the circumstances?

Phillips: It was in the airport in Oakland, California, wherever that was. Oakland's by San Francisco. I actually was rather proud that I'd done this and survived, even in a war that I wasn't convinced that we were doing the right way or whatever. I personally had done this. But, even though my father was very proud to see me and so forth, a lot of the college...especially the college kids and so on and so forth... When I came back and was going to school, the Vietnam vets tended to sort of hang together. The other kids, they weren't nice to them or whatever. You didn't make a big deal of it. I just felt more or less like we did what we were asked, and it was all... not for nothing, but it didn't seem to be helping any at all. We didn't seem to be doing some grand enterprise, like World War II, when we got rid of fascist dictators and this and that. And Korea, [where] we stopped the communists from invading another country. That never formally happened in Vietnam, even though they did, it wasn't formal. Then we ended up losing, and I could project what was going to happen as soon as we stopped supplying them. And it did. As soon as we

stopped supplying them and pulled out the majority of our forces... It's just what's going to happen in Afghanistan.⁴⁰ You watch. I can see it coming.

DePue: Nineteen seventy-five is the year that the communists were eventually successful and took over all of Vietnam. Saigon became Ho Chi Minh City and things like that. Did you have a reaction to that?

Phillips: Yeah, I had a whole twang on that. I can remember seeing them pushing the helicopters off the sides of the aircraft carriers—because they didn't have enough room to land all the helicopters—and the people rushing to get on the helicopters. I knew how ever many got on and got out of there, there was going to be buckets of people who'd helped us and worked with us that were going to be in serious trouble, as soon as this all happened. I'm sure there was.

I'm not sure I heard a lot about it, but for them, people who were in the South Vietnamese Army or who worked directly with the Americans, they [the communists] didn't look kindly on those people. I felt bad for them. And I knew it all seemed to be... We spent so much time and so much effort. Afghanistan is a bad place, but what do they have, 4,000 casualties? We had fifty-eight, 58,000, **58,000!**

DePue: Did it make you angry?

Phillips: I had in my mind, if we're going to do what we're going to do there, that was our job. I wouldn't have gone about it the way they did it. I just wouldn't have. There was no doubt... Even when I was there, that was a frustrating thing. I said, "I don't see any end to this thing. I don't see how we can win. What do you want me to do to win? What do you want us to do? Tell me what you want us to do to win." Nobody could ever tell me that. Is it go here? Take this? Do this? Do that? Tell us what you want us to do. Nobody ever did that. All we were ever doing was running around, chasing guys and counting bodies. That's baloney.

DePue: Do you think, in retrospect, there was a way to actually win the war?

Phillips: Sure there was. Absolutely there was a way to win the war. I'm not sure of the greater political ramifications, but we had to go to North Vietnam. You just have to. We did. We had to go to North Vietnam. Of course, when we went to North Korea, looking back on it, the Chinese intervened, and then it became a

⁴⁰ The War in Afghanistan (or the U.S. War in Afghanistan), Operation Enduring Freedom, followed the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan of October 2001. The war's public aims were to dismantle al-Qaeda and deny it a safe base of operations in Afghanistan by removing the Taliban from power. Since the initial objectives were completed at the end of 2001, the war mostly involves U.S. and allied Afghan government troops battling Taliban insurgents. The Afghan opposition has been fighting the Taliban in an ongoing civil war since 1996. To date, the War in Afghanistan is the longest in U.S. history.
([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Afghanistan_\(2001%E2%80%93present\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_in_Afghanistan_(2001%E2%80%93present)))

stalemate when the Chinese... I think they were thinking that that was going to happen again, that if we went into North Vietnam, the Chinese would intervene and whatever. I don't know.

But I know what we were doing, and it parallels Afghanistan. I've never seen a closer parallel, because they're chasing those Taliban guys around those mountains. They get some, and they don't ever lose a battle, but then they seem to come right back. The people want them there. They don't want us there. Those people in Vietnam didn't want us there. They didn't like us (laughs). I never saw a Vietnamese that I thought really wanted us there, but I didn't talk to a whole gaggle of them.

DePue: The strategy or the tactics of fighting the war is one thing. The rationale or the decision to go there in the first place is another. Do you think the United States was wrong in the rationale for going into Vietnam?

Phillips: No. What was happening... I had to later go back and do this, and I did that, check... I went all the way back to World War II, when the Vietnamese and the Japanese were there. Then the Japanese left and left a power vacuum. Actually, at that time, Ho Chi Minh, even though he was a communist, was very sympathetic because there were American advisors he had with him that would pick up downed flyers and whatever, got along with him real good.

There was a brief opportunity to work with the people of Vietnam and help them come up with some sort of reasonable government. But then the French intervened and said they wanted the country back as a colony, and they took it back. We just sort of just stepped aside, and it your [France's] deal. And they did. Of course, they fought over it for eight years. France is a modern industrial country. You think they could handle North Vietnamese; there wasn't a North Vietnam then.

DePue: Viet Minh was what they called themselves.

Phillips: Yeah, and they were just guerillas. They ended up losing. I could see this is what's going to happen. They would keep coming; I don't care how many of them we got. They are. It's not a matter of body count. That was our only measure of success that I ever heard of was body count. I think that was absolutely wrong. You have to give a soldier a goal. "This is our goal. This is what we need to do. This is where we need to go, and we'll be okay. This is what you're aiming at." Well, we were never aiming at anything.

DePue: You've mentioned Afghanistan several times here. But let's start with 9-11. Do you remember 9-11?

Phillips: Oh, yeah, sure. I was at a workshop with a bunch of principals, over in... I think it was Decatur, when I heard about it. I thought, "Oh, my gosh. They're hijacking our planes." Of course, they tried to do smaller things like that and then the blow up, the trade center before, some car bomb or something like

that. I'd never heard of the word Al Qaida before that, and I wasn't aware of Osama Bin Laden.⁴¹ But I knew that the Arabs out there just hated the ground we walked on and blamed us for, I guess, being friends with Israel. It's a huge stumbling block, as far as the Arabs are concerned.

DePue: Did any of that make sense to you?

Phillips: Oh yeah, I understood. And I knew we'd be chasing those guys all around. I kind of figured that after Afghanistan that they'd made a strategic mistake, and they'd push our button once too hard there.

DePue: You mean that Al Qaida had pushed the Americans' button too much?

Phillips: Yeah, right. Al Qaida was housed in Afghanistan. Of course, we went there not after too long, and we did. There's no problem taking the country. We took the country in a breeze and held it.

But again, the people don't want you there, and they don't want us there now. The average person in Afghanistan, they'll take your money and smile at you and then hate your guts. That's what they do; I don't know... But you're not going to make friends with those people.

What I would do, and what I thought they should have done in Vietnam... what I think they should do in Afghanistan... You leave a force there that's big enough to counter the Taliban returning and taking over the country. Like, if that's 10,000 or 15,000 or whatever. I can't see the Taliban taking out 10,000 of our guys, as long as we have air power to support them. That's not going to happen.

We should have done that in Vietnam, leave enough there to protect the country. I'm not sure the North Vietnamese would have been successful had we had 10,000 guys, boots on the ground, one division, and air power to support them. I don't think they could have done what they did. I don't think so. They could have never done what they did. I think a force that big is enough. [Then] you have what you want, which is your country is still there. They're still not going to like us, but we're not going to have any of this business of 500,000 there, chasing them all around the place. You just have them there in a force big enough to counter anything that insurgents or rebels or whatever you want to call them can muster.

DePue: Would that same analogy work for Iraq? Iraq is quite a bit different.

⁴¹ Al-Qaeda, translation: "The Base", "The Foundation" or "The Database", alternatively spelled al-Qaida and al-Qa'ida) is a militant Sunni Islamist multi-national organization founded in 1988 by Osama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam, and several other Arab volunteers during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Al-Qaeda>)

Phillips: Quite a bit different, yeah. Iraq was a modern industrial country. Baghdad's a big town. It's like New York City or whatever. And you have to look at the leadership with Iraq. The leader there was the focus of everything, Saddam [Hussein].⁴² People forget that, for a long time Saddam was our friend. He was our buffer against the Iranians. We supplied him and were militarily friendly with him because he did that. Then finally, I think he was his own worst enemy. He just went off the deep end. He could have gotten himself out of that mess a bunch of times, but he didn't.

DePue: The consensus—that's a dangerous word to use when you're talking about history anyway—but the consensus was that going into Afghanistan right after 9-11 was probably the right thing to do.

Phillips: Yeah, it was.

DePue: And many think that going into Iraq in 2003 was the wrong thing to do.

Phillips: It was right and wrong. It was right in that we helped topple a guy who was just a megalomaniac. He was cruel beyond any, any description we have of people. He was the worst kind of brut. He was sort of like Idi Amin in that category, those kind of guys.⁴³ So it's good that we got rid of him.

I think our mistake in Iraq...number one, we were looking for weapons of mass destruction, but I believe the people thought they were there and thought it was a threat, even though, if they had them, I don't think he could have put them on a scud missile and used them.

I think the problem in taking out Iraq was after we took out Iraq. After we took out Iraq, we just sort of dismantled everything that they had there and started to remake it. For example, the army... I think if we'd have left the Iraqi Army in place, except for the Republican Guard nuts and stuff like that, the army would have stabilized the country themselves, and we wouldn't have had to do it. Then we're not fighting them. The Iraqi Army, I think, would have done that. But that didn't happen. So we dismantled the army, and then we're there.

The other thing is, our greatest threat, militarily, was these roadside bombs. That's where we lost everybody. They're driving along, when they explode a bomb. What you do to counter that is you have armored vehicles that are bomb proof. Hell, we could make them. Hell, they've got them. And you should have seen right away, that's the problem, so that's what we're

⁴² Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti was President of Iraq from 16 July 1979 until 9 April 2003. A leading member of the revolutionary Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party, Saddam played a key role in the 1968 coup (later referred to as the 17 July Revolution) that brought the party to power in Iraq. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saddam_Hussein)

⁴³ Idi Amin Dada Oumee was a Ugandan military officer. As a general, Amin overthrew the elected government of Milton Obote and declared himself president of Uganda, launching a ruthless eight-year regime in which an estimated 300,000 civilians were massacred. (<https://www.history.com/topics/africa/idi-amin>)

going to do. All these vehicles are going to be bomb proof and whatever. That was a little in late coming.

DePue: We're largely out of Iraq. We're talking about getting out of Afghanistan, and I'm going to finish this series of questions with this then. The inevitable discussion in United States politics becomes, "Is it time to downsize the military and how far?" We're on a serious trend towards doing a significant downsizing.

Phillips: No, it is not time to downsize military. I wouldn't downsize them one platoon right now. I think we are in a position that makes us look weak in the world now. I think that those people in Libya and Benghazi, they got away with that, and they should never have gotten away with that. I think we are allowing these countries, like Libya and Tunisia and those others... Egypt now, holy cow, these countries were ruled by not the nicest people, [Muammar] Gaddafi [in Libya] and [Hosni] Mubarak [in Egypt]. They're not the greatest guys in the world. But at least they're not fighting us. To some extent, they're assisting us. Well, all that's going to be gone. One by one, these countries are going to go.

I can tell you, whatever happens in Syria... The people that are fighting to gain control of Syria are not Syrians who want to get rid of this guy [President Bashar al-Assad]. It's Arabs from around the world [who] are coalescing to do a great coalition of Arab countries, the way they always wanted to do. They always wanted that. See, the Arabs were always fragmented in the world, all over.

DePue: Arabs or Muslims?

Phillips: Same thing. That's just their religion.

DePue: Well, there's a huge Muslim population that is not Arab, in places like Indonesia.

Phillips: Oh, yeah. Well, I'm talking about Africa, North Africa and the Middle East; I'm talking that area. But they have always dreamed of getting together and having one big powerful country because they have the same religion and blah, blah, blah. And that's happening now, very slowly, one by one. I don't think we can downsize. This sequester thing, politically, I think it's going to be bad news. I wouldn't downsize us at all. We have an excellent professional Army, and I think we're going to need them. I don't know what this nut [Chairman, Kim Jong-un] in North Korea's going to do; although, I don't think he's going to attack anybody; he's not **that** stupid.

DePue: Everything you're describing is that we still live in a very dangerous world.

Phillips: Very dangerous world, very dangerous world.

DePue: Let's finish up by going back to some more personal things in different years and reflecting back on all your experiences in Vietnam especially. How did those six, eight months that you were in Vietnam change you?

Phillips: I believe... When I got out of college, I felt confident. I have to say—I'm not sure if this is right—but for me, I was always pretty confident of myself and my ability to do things and whatever. When I went into the Army, the Army levels you out, if you know what I mean. I think they do that on purpose. At the time I thought it was awfully demeaning and silly, the things you do and the names they call you and all of that. But actually it was probably a good thing. I would suggest a lot of young men go through that experience.

Then going to Vietnam, think that probably made me appreciate... I know when I was there, I sure appreciated what I had before I was there (DePue laughs). It made me appreciate being an American and being able to do what I wanted and purchase what I wanted and have the chance to do a career if I worked hard and things like that. Those people in Vietnam, they didn't have a chance like that. They don't have a chance like that now, that sort of thing.

Then you sort of feel mortal, if you will. When you see people die... Most people don't see people die ever. Maybe your grandparents died in the hospital, but you don't see young men die or see the devaluing. You think, "Oh, my gosh, he's nineteen years old, and he died." He never gets a chance to even do whatever. That's what bothered me. Guys are dying. I don't know for what, what for? If I could have been convinced that, gosh, we're really doing something important here. It's important that we do this in our national interest. and we're helping, whatever.

But the people hated our guts. To a person, they didn't like us. They didn't want us there. We had a militarily purposeless war. I was just bothered by that. Now at the time, I'm bothered about just staying alive. I'm scared that I'm just going to be a number like everybody else. I sure wanted to continue doing what I do and get out of there. There's no doubt about that. I think everybody does. At the time, you're just thinking about how many days you got left. You count them out to DEROS [date eligible for return from overseas] day. For lack of a better term, it just sort of changed my perspective and made me a little bit more mature.

DePue: At this point in your life, having gone through that experience—you talked quite a bit about what our current situation is—what advice or wisdom would you pass on to future generations?

Phillips: I would say they need to realize just what a great, wonderful, powerful country we have and what they have. And they don't realize it. They just take it for granted, all the things they have here in the United States that you don't have in Mexico and South America and even in Europe to some extent. They

just don't have those things. I went to school in Europe. Holy smokes, it is dog eat dog there. If you don't achieve, you're out. That's great for the ones that achieve, but there's buckets of them that don't. And here, we try to give everybody a chance to live a decent life. It's getting harder and harder; I understand that. But you just have no idea how lucky you are to just be in this country now.

DePue: If I could boil it down to a couple of words, freedom and opportunity?

Phillips: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, that's it. You have the freedom to pick your leaders, to pick your job. If you want to go somewhere... If I want to go to Missouri, I don't have to have papers when I cross the border, to go to Missouri. If I want to quit my job and go out and start my own little company, you can do those things. You can't do those things in a lot of other... They have no shot to do those things. If I want to be a soldier, be a soldier.

DePue: Would you recommend that?

Phillips: Sure, if that's what you wanted. I'm kind of sorry I didn't stay with the general, I have to admit. People ask me, if you could do one thing different than you did... I probably would have stayed. I **would** have stayed, if my situation would have allowed me to stay. There's no doubt I would have stayed. Now, what would have happened after that, the superintendent stuff and what I'm doing now... You never know. But I kind of liked it.

DePue: Any final comments for us?

Phillips: No. I appreciate the chance to kind of tell you my story because I'd like to sit down and tell my kids or grandkids my stories, but I don't know where to start, or my friends. I don't know where to start. All they get is little snippets of it, the guardian angel story or the Hawaii story or whatever. But I've had a chance to tell you the **whole** story, and I appreciate that because I have a feeling that this will be the one and only chance I'll ever have to say the whole story.

DePue: I appreciate you giving us the opportunity because it was certainly an interesting ride, (Phillips laughs) the Vietnam stuff, the experiences as a medic in Vietnam, your ability to tell those stories, and then this peculiar twist of fate.

Phillips: Yeah. I was lucky; I was just lucky; that's all it was, at the right place at the right time.

DePue: Thank you very much, Bill.

Phillips: You betcha. Thank you, Mark.

(end of transcript #3)